

HORROR FILMS OF THE 1980s



JOHN KENNETH MUIR

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ALSO BY JOHN KENNETH MUIR
AND FROM MCFARLAND

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HORROR FILMS OF THE 1980S

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For my patient wife Kathryn.
Thank you for making it
through “The Stay Awake.”

Acknowledgments

Quite a group of colleagues helped undertake this survey of 1980s horrors with me. Firstly, my deep appreciation goes to the book's stalwart "guest" reviewers, authors and critics Christopher Wayne Curry, William Latham, MaryAnn Johanson, Joseph Maddrey, Scott Nicholson, and Sam Shapiro.

Thanks to my friend and fellow horror lover, Jim Blanton, for a timely delivery of *The Keep* and the gift of *Street Trash*. Kevin Flanagan, a research assistant, student and supporter, also participates, delivering a fine interview with director Ken Russell, and I appreciate his efforts.

It was a great experience interviewing the talents behind my favorite 1980s horrors. Rebecca Balding, Kent Beyda, Kevin Connor, James L. Conway, Ellie Cornell, Thom Eberhardt, Richard Franklin, Gloria Gifford, Tom McLoughlin, Peter Smokler and Lewis Teague all helped out enormously in this regard. This book is demonstrably more fun because they joined me for the ride. Love and kisses to my agent, June Clark, who is always helpful, supportive and encouraging, and was doubly so on this project.

Finally, very special thanks to my wife Kathryn, who watched over three hundred horror films alongside me in about a year's time. Sometimes, this meant a weekend of five horror films on Saturday and Sunday. For the record, she only broke down into helpless tears twice: during *April Fool's Day* and *Silent Night, Deadly Night 3*.

Preface

To paraphrase an ad line from a popular 1980s zombie flick, “I’m back from the grave and ready to party.” My earlier horror film survey from McFarland, *Horror Films of the 1970s*, earned a number of kudos (including a Booklist Editor’s Selection) when it was released in 2002, but psychologically, the 672 page tome took a lot out of me, which is why I wrote the happier *Encyclopedia of Superheroes on Film and Television* (2004) before broaching this text, which I knew would be in every way possible bigger and more elaborate than the disco decade edition.

More than 325 horror films are surveyed and detailed in *Horror Films of the 1980s*. Unlike the popular and useful Internet Movie Database, however, the films included herein are dated by the year of their American *release*, not the production or copyright year, which in some cases is different. In other words, *Tremors* was produced in 1989 but released in 1990, so it is not featured in this book. Instead it will be catalogued in *Horror Films of the 1990s* (keep watching the bookstores).

Why go about a survey in this fashion? As moviegoers with long personal histories, we tend to think immediately of the year and season a film arrived in multiplexes to thrill us. It would seem just plain wrong to include two hits from the memorable summer of 1986 —*The Fly* and *Aliens*—in the year 1985. That doesn’t jibe with memory. Similarly, the summer of 1982 was a golden age that included John Carpenter’s *The Thing* and Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist* and it would be strange and disconcerting to think of them arranged instead in 1981 rather than 1982 when they were seen and reviewed.

This book covers all horror films released from the year 1980 through the year 1989. There may be some debate about whether some of the films included in the text are actually horror or science fiction. *Brainstorm* (1983), *Dreamscape* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984) and *Aliens* (1986) leap to mind. For the purposes of this book, this is the judgment I’ve made: If it is the movie’s aim to terrify, horrify or frighten, it qualifies as a horror production. If the film’s purpose is to illuminate with wonder or awe some aspect of a scientific discovery or future age, it is science fiction and thus not included.

Representative films from Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and other countries are sprinkled throughout this text, too, especially if

they had impact on American shores, emerging as video cult hits or even welcoming a foreign director into the brotherhood of American filmmaking. However, please note the following disclaimer: They are included under the names by which they first came to America, even though those versions are often corrupted by retitling, dubbing or excessive cuts to satisfy the MPAA. Again, this is how these ventures were introduced to the country in the critical years of 1980 to 1989, and it seems appropriate to record them for posterity in that fashion.

All the films reviewed in *Horror Films of the 1980s* appear alphabetically by year of American release, and entries follow a specific formula pioneered by *Horror Films of the 1970s*, so that these two books may be viewed as companion pieces.

As to specifics: The Critical Reception for each entry is a sampling of reviews or “blurbs.” As the primary author, my view is important, of course, but other views should also be democratically represented, so the reader emerges with a fuller sense of how movies rate.

In that spirit, I have invited a number of guest reviewers to write short, original reviews for many films. I did not assign particular films to this cadre, because it’s more interesting to see how contemporary authors, critics and horror aficionados select films from the decade and then judge them. My guest reviewers in this book’s Critical Reception include the following talent (in alphabetical order):

Christopher Wayne Curry is the co-author of the 1998 Creation Cinema Book, *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*. Chris is here not just because he is a fine writer, but because he is an expert on “fringe” and underground cinema, and there is no shortage of that fare from the 1980s.

MaryAnn Johanson is the noted film critic who writes as The Flick Filosopher and runs her own immensely popular review site (www.flickfilosopher.com). She also maintains a blog on Generation X issues, Geek Philosophy (www.geekphilosophy.com). MaryAnn’s specialty is Generation X geek culture and the reasons these 1980s films have stuck in our collective memory for two decades. Her review choices in the book reflect her interest in the thin line that blurs science fiction and horror during the decade.

William Latham is the horror novelist behind *Mary’s Monster*, an

updating of the Frankenstein mythos, as well as two *Space*: 1999 horror-oriented books published by Powys Media, *Resurrection* and *Eternity Unbound*. Bill also submitted his guest commentaries to *Horror Films of the 1970s* and my 2004 book, *The Encyclopedia of Superheroes on Film and Television*.

Joseph Maddrey is the author of the scholarly thesis from McFarland *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the Modern American Horror Film*, and here the author contributes a series of reviews that lean more towards the academic side of the critical spectrum. Joe is also the associate producer on the first two seasons of the Discovery Channel paranormal TV series, *A Haunting*.

Scott Nicholson is the award-winning novelist of such Appalachian-based horrors as *The Red Church*, *The Harvest*, *The Manor*, *The Home* and *The Farm*. He also renders an informed verdict on several high-profile (and low-profile) '80s monstrosities.

Sam Shapiro is a guest columnist and reviewer for *The Charlotte Observer*, North Carolina's paper of record, and a film instructor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Beyond the Critical Reception, the next portion of each entry is the nuts and bolts data—*Cast & Crew*—which highlights the film's personnel, MPAA rating and running time.

The P.O.V., named after a favorite tool of horror filmmakers in the 1980s (the point of view shot), offers a pithy remark or insight by the makers of the film. Similarly, the *Incantation* is a memorable line of dialogue. The Incantation may be a brilliant line or an incredibly stupid one. The Synopsis is a brief recounting of the film's plot, shorter than in *Horror Films of the 1970s* because it was necessary to save space to accommodate the nearly 125 more films.

The Commentary is purely and simply this author's analysis of the film in question. About how I grade the films, readers often ask if I grade on a "curve" since I love and admire the horror genre. The answer is no, but I do undertake this task in a fashion that many critics don't.

In other words, I don't downgrade automatically because of subject matter. If a film such as *Hellraiser* accomplishes everything it sets out

to do, then by my assessment, it's just as strong a film as any mainstream dramatic movie. I don't necessarily expect a premise worthy of Shakespeare in a 1980s horror movie, but I do expect that the movie will explore its concept well no matter how silly or bizarre it is. Another benchmark I always mark horror movies on is easy: Is it scary? A horror movie should terrify, so that's an important consideration in the ratings system.

Some readers of my 1970s horror film book will notice that my attitude has mellowed towards some of the 1980s slasher films. To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, you can't write a book with the movies you want, but rather with the ones you've got. Do I wish that some of these films were better? Yes, but I also try to see good where there is good to see.

Especially notable films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* also feature one additional section of information this section, titled Legacy, which examines the film's reputation and position in the horror pantheon beyond the original context of the 1980s.

Some films also include an additional Close-Up section which features interview material with many of the talents who created these films. This is a new facet for the survey, one I hope readers will enjoy.

All of the films are also rated in the traditionally accepted four star system, with four stars representing the highest rating, and one star the lowest.

In the section preceding each year, I've also provided a Timeline that gazes at world events the year that movies were released. This is also a new feature, but an important one in helping to explain the history of these films and the decade.

I

Don't Worry, Be Happy (Or, Be Afraid ... Be Very Afraid...) An Introduction to Horror Films of the 1980s

In the lead-in to my 2002 book called *Horror Films of the 1970s*, I opened that survey of the disco decade's cinematic genre achievements with the following theory¹:

Art does not exist in a vacuum. *Instead, it is inexorably bound to the time period from which it sprang.* Sometimes, an insight into a social or historical context in a work of art is entirely coincidental, arising from a set of understandings unknown even to the artist who rendered it. But more often than not, there is *intent* in art to reflect, compare, reveal, contrast or echo some important element of the creator's universe.

The same preface also emphasized a second truism, one that I pulled down from what I then termed the “*darker side*” of the aesthetic self. Simply stated, it was this: that throughout American history, horror films have universally mirrored the fears and anxieties of their real-life epochs.

Or, as noted by genre historian Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, the monsters and menaces populating horror films “shape-shift from decade to decade as the fears of the popular audience change.”²

Which is why *Dracula* (1931) and *King Kong* (1933) serve as escapist, romantic fare for the Depression-ravaged 1930s, brimming with adventure and fantasy.

Which is why *Them!* (1954) reflects a paranoia about a new Pandora’s Box opened during the Atomic-Eisenhower age.

Finally, this argument explains why—throughout the 1970s—bones of

contention such as women's lib (*The Stepford Wives* [1975]), excessive street crime (*A Clockwork Orange* [1971]), birth control (*It's Alive* [1973]), government conspiracies (*The Clonus Horror* [1979]), even the energy crisis (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1974]) all merited horror films of various stripe.

This art-imitates-life dynamic remains critically important in any history and understanding of horror's aesthetic, but even more so when dissecting the array of genre movies unleashed during the 1980s, a decade of transition and evolution wherein production of horror movies reached a new pinnacle in the United States.

By some accounts, production spiked by as much as one-third during these halcyon years, and the genre asserted itself a consistent juggernaut in box office competitions as well as in the new format called "home video," which had a major impact on the film industry by 1989.

"Horror ... proved to be one of the decade's most important genres," affirms film historian Stephen Prince, "measured in terms of popularity as well as social impact."³

So what was eating Americans in the 1980s and why?

What was it about the age of Madonna wannabes, erasable pens, velcro wallets, boom boxes and Synth Pop that made the horror genre so prominent and profitable? The answer to that question is complicated, but there are a few obvious places to start.

In the 1980s, Americans suffered from an ailment which can only be termed an *apocalypse mentality*. The Cold War with the Soviet Union ran hot, and figures as prominent as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the fortieth president of the United States publicly mulled that ours might be the last generation; that never before had so many troubling "signs" come together to suggest the advent of Judgment Day.

A nuclear apocalypse was most widely feared, especially with the self-same president making jokes about bombing Russia, gaffes about recall-able nuclear missiles and declaring a belief in the strategy of a "winnable" nuclear war.

Accordingly, the pop culture responded to the prevailing apocalypse mentality. Music saw the ascent of nihilist punk and death metal during the decade, and horror films imagined a surfeit of blazing mushroom clouds. America launched a pre-emptive nuclear strike in

The Dead Zone (1983) and *Miracle Mile* (1988), mankind was annihilated by nukes in *The Terminator* (1984), and an American president suffered nightmares of fall-out and Judgment Day in *Dreamscape* (1984).

Not every end-of-the-world scenario was nuclear. *The Final Conflict* (1981) and *The Seventh Sign* (1988) posited a Biblical End Times and the return of Christ. Also, one notable eighties movie, *Night of the Comet* (1984), suggested mass destruction by a comet that hadn't been in orbit since the extinction of the dinosaurs.

The other looming fear of the 1980s involved the sudden, unexpected rise of a sexually transmitted disease, AIDS. Passed from person to person in bodily fluids, this disease was first known as "the Gay Plague" but infection quickly grew to epidemic proportions. Appropriately, horror movies responded with anxiety. In John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), only a blood test could determine who was healthy and who might be a monstrous "thing." In the same director's *Prince of Darkness* (1987), Evil was depicted as a glowing fluid that, once swallowed, would contaminate its host. In David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), Jeff Goldblum portrayed a scientist facing a degenerative disease that ruined his form, and so on.

The horror trends in the 1980s were not all (literally) Earth-shattering. Some trends represented small, almost unnoticed shifts in popular thinking. For instance, the eighties were the first decade in which average Americans made a concerted and sustained effort to kick the smoking habit (remember those once ubiquitous "*I Quit Smoking*" pins?). Even this matter found an outlet in the horror cinema. In *Nightmares* (1983), a woman who needed a cigarette fix in the middle of the night faced jeopardy from a serial killer on the loose. In *Cat's Eye* (1985), family man James Woods found that the cost of continuing to smoke was simply too high once he had signed onto a quitting plan administered by the Mob.

Gazing deeper, one can detect another commonality among eighties horrors, and this overriding *leitmotif* derives from the one towering figure of the yuppie (young upwardly mobile professional...) decade.

I'm not referring to Elm Street murderer Freddy Krueger, either...

But rather the late Ronald Reagan, the fortieth president of the United States.

Whenever I lecture on the subject of 1980s horror films at conventions

or universities, I preface my remarks by stating that if you love the 1980s, you can thank the Republican Party. And similarly, if you dislike the 1980s, you can thank the Republican Party.



Which towering figure dominated the “greed is good” decade?
Dream demon Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund)?



Or the conservative commander-in-chief, President Ronald Reagan?

For it was the Republicans who held sway over the United States presidency throughout the decade. Reagan was a colossal national figure from 1980 through 1988, and his heir apparent, George Bush, was elected primarily on the policies and strengths of his predecessor. These two men, their cohorts, and their government drove America's policies, both foreign and domestic, for the entire sweep of the "greed is good" Gordon Gekko decade, and so it is Mr. Reagan more than anyone else who casts a long shadow across the span of years from

1980 to 1989.

Lest anyone accuse me of partisanship, I simply say this: Just wait until I get to *Horror Films of the 1990s* and discuss how *The Mangler* (1995) reflects President Bill Clinton's era and his decision regarding NAFTA.

But back to the point. If we subscribe to the theory that horror movies always reflect the fears of their historical context and their time, then the horrors of the 1980s are surely a reaction (either pro or con) to the dramatic political, cultural and economic changes Reagan instituted during his time in office.

How can one make so bold a claim? How can one lay the achievements and the disappointments of an entire decade, politics and cinema alike at one man's doorstep? Again the answer lays in the nature of that particular individual.

A former Hollywood actor and a senior citizen when he first took the oath of office, Reagan was a revolutionary in many significant ways, but not necessarily in the fashion one might suspect. His two terms, and the term of his successor as well, reflected a breach that can only be described as the greatest chasm between image and reality that this country had yet witnessed.

Yes, the age of acid-wash jeans, Garbage Pail Kids, *Miami Vice* Blazers, Garanimals and the Brat Pack represented a time of total war between what was sold as policy to the American citizenry, and what was actually achieved in real-life governance, and it was this startling duality, this gulf between fact and fiction, that subsequently "trickled down" right into the horror movies of the age.

When considering 1980s horror cinema, two particularly trenchant catchphrases of the decade leap to mind as capturing the essence of this conflict between illusion and reality.

The first arises from George Bush's presidential campaign in 1988, when he battled the inept Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. It's actually Bush's very campaign song, which he deployed to get voters revved up at campaign events, in hopes of continuing the policies and legacies of Reagan. The song: "*Don't Worry, Be Happy.*"

In essence, this tune suggested that everything would be all right under continued Republican rule, and all you had to do to reap the benefits of the *status quo* was vote Republican. Bush, who had once stated that he was pro-Reagan "blindly" (!?), pitched himself to

Americans as an alternative to the gloom 'n' doom Democrats, whom he suggested could see the cloud under every silver lining.

The second resonant catchphrase remains a part of our pop culture lexicon even today. It was an ad line (and chunk of dialogue) from the surprise box-office hit of 1986, the squishy David Cronenberg remake called *The Fly*. This catchphrase warns against what former Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan might term “irrational exuberance.” The line: “Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid.”

How can a single decade, ruled by one larger-than-life president and his strutting political party, also be a decade of two such contradictory messages as “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” and “Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid?” and why were horror movies of the day obsessed with this duality?

Again, one must begin and end the debate with the policies and characteristics of Reagan, the man and the politician.

“To a degree unmatched in any era since Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal,” suggests historian William H. Chafe in *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, “Ronald Reagan imprinted his own personal brand on the decade of the 1980s.”⁴

What was that brand? Putting a fine point on it, President Reagan cast a smiling, avuncular, and charming face on some of the most damaging fiscal and social policies ever enacted in America.

“Part of Reagan’s success as a leader lay in the fact that much of the myths he created were preferable to reality,” opines authors Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus in *Landslide: The Unmaking of the President, 1984–1988*. “[H]e said it was possible to have it all—to cut taxes and increase defense spending and at the same time, to fight terrorism, roll back Communism and the threat of nuclear war, all without risking American lives. Reagan seemed to be offering a miracle cure.”⁵

In other words, President Reagan became famous for selling an illusion, for appearing to do one thing, while actually doing something entirely different.

“Reagan’s politics and the aristocratic fashion culture share a fundamental inauthenticity,” suggests writer Deborah Silverman, “a reliance on fabrication, and a glaring disparity between symbolism and reality.”⁶

Or, to put it as author William J. Palmer did in his study *The Films of*

the 1980s, this decade “in its nostalgia and its sequel-mania, expressed a longing for the simplicity of the past (especially the fifties) and a fear of a future that is consistently being mortgaged by the cavalier deficit spending of the arms-happy Reagan government.”⁷

Don’t Worry, Be Happy. Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid.

Far too many policies President Reagan enacted during his two terms boasted this “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”/“Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid” schizophrenia.

In Reagan’s initial inaugural address (January 20, 1981), for instance, he decried the Federal government as the enemy of free enterprise and, in general, liberty.

“It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed,” he established. Reagan’s self-stated goal therefore was to shrink the Federal bureaucracy (and also cut taxes). But the idea that he accomplished this goal was a mere *illusion*.

During Reagan’s two terms in office, the federal work force actually grew from 2.8 million to three million employees, meaning that the federal government Reagan distrusted was actually larger when he left it than when he had found it, managed by Jimmy Carter.

His administration added 61,000 federal employees during Reagan’s eight years, and ironically, this work of reducing a bloated government was left undone until President Bill Clinton—a “liberal”—cut federal employees by more than 300,000 in the 1990s, thus achieving what Reagan had promised and failed to deliver.

Actually, Reagan’s government so ballooned the size of the federal government that the president even added a whole new department to the bureaucracy, the Department of Veteran Affairs! Of course, one can judge the value or merit of these selections, but what one *cannot* claim with any semblance of veracity is that Reagan fulfilled his inauguration promise to shrink government.

On the matter of taxes, Reagan was similarly two-faced. He ran on a platform of cutting taxes. He did so, but then, facing a precipitous drop in federal revenue, raised taxes once in 1983 (a gasoline tax), again in 1984, and then signed into law the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which represented the largest tax increase in history up to that point.

Again, one can vigorously debate the merits of these policies and

Reagan's choices, but there is a clear conflict between the promise of cutting taxes and the measures actually taken.

Reagan also landed in the White House armed with his own economic priorities, a formula termed Reaganomics. His primary competitor-turned-Vice President, George Bush, famously derided Reagan's theory of fiscal management as "voodoo economics," though recanted once he accepted a slot on the ticket. Reagan was an ardent supply-sider and appeared to be a fiscal hawk, pushing for a reduction in spending and a lowering of government debt.

Yet Reaganomics was really, in the words of *The Christian Science Monitor*, nothing more than "a hodgepodge policy of tight money, deep budget cuts in the social service area, and reductions"⁸ in taxes for wealthy individuals.

Again, there was this Janus-like quality to Reagan's policies: While ostensibly trying to end a deep economic recession, he was actually crippling the poor and rewarding the rich. By 1983, there were 35 million people living in poverty, some five million *more* than when Reagan took office.

And the cumulative national debt accrued in his two terms came to a staggering 2.7 trillion dollars, roughly 200 billion dollars a year in interest to taxpayers.⁹ And Reagan was a fiscal conservative? Once more, the image didn't jibe with reality.

Personally, Reagan was himself a man of contradictions too. He was beloved by the religious right, but did not regularly attend church services while ensconced in the White House, unlike Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

He also rigorously espoused traditional family values, and yet was the nation's first and only divorced president.

He was hailed as "The Great Communicator" and yet what policies did this "hands off" manager-style president actually communicate in detail? His off-the-cuff remarks tended to consist of embarrassing blunders and gaffes, including the belief that ketchup is a vegetable, trees caused environmental pollution, and some homeless people were homeless "by choice."

Reagan was even—to coin a popular Republican broadside from the presidential campaign of 2004—a flip flopper. He'd been a Democrat before he became a Republican (in fact, his political conversion conveniently occurred in 1962, a mere two years before he ran for the

governorship of California).

Even the strongest fans of Reagan will, in their more candid moments, acknowledge that there were deep contradictions and dualities at work in this 1980s president:

Ronald Reagan seemed an unlikely candidate for evangelical adoration. Divorced, remarried, and a subpar parent of children who were hardly models of piety, he first won fame in the movie and television industries, both regularly excoriated by conservative Christians for their contribution to moral decay. As governor of California, he signed relatively liberal abortion measures and opposed legislation that would have barred homosexuals from teaching jobs. His 1979 tax return revealed that he contributed less than 1 percent of his adjusted gross income to charitable and religious causes. He was not a regular churchgoer....¹⁰

On yet another front, Reagan's response to a major military crisis during his term was also skewed by imagery and illusion. To wit: On October 23, 1983, a terrorist truck bombing in Beirut, Lebanon, killed 241 U.S. Marines stationed there.

Two days later, on October 25, President Reagan confidently ordered the military invasion of a small island nation named Grenada!

A group of United States citizens, all medical students, were reportedly threatened by Communists there. The result? Suddenly, the nation didn't really have to think much about Beirut anymore. The illusion (*Don't Worry, Be Happy*) of easy military victory supplanted the humiliation of a terrible defeat (*Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid*).

Some folks may read the preceding remarks as an indictment of Reagan. Truly, no such intent exists. Reagan made the choices he did based on the information he had at hand, and for the good of the country. Again, the point is merely that his government *promised* one thing and *delivered* something entirely different on occasions too numerous to enumerate, and across the board of American policy.

Yet the American people totally loved Ronald Reagan, and there were good reasons for the adoration. Reagan served admirably as the nation's grandfather, and in trying times like the space shuttle Challenger disaster in early 1986, proved a superb influence and

guiding light to the country. No one who living through those times could quibble with that assessment. His carefully wrought illusions and so-called “New Patriotism” made Americans feel better about themselves, even if problems went unsolved.

But how had Americans come to Reagan, the actor, the image maker and the national granddaddy in the first place? Well, let’s face facts, the 1970s ended with a whimper. There was a terrible slump of the American spirit and confidence during that time. U.S. citizens were held hostage in Iran, and the our military was weakened, even humiliated, after a failed rescue attempt ordered by President Carter.

Carter had also bravely but foolishly called for joined American sacrifice and conservation of energy. However, the U.S. wasn’t in the mood to hear any of that. It was a painful acknowledgment that the country’s prestige and resources had atrophied badly in the disco decade. Comparatively speaking, there was no distance in Carter’s administration between rhetoric and reality. When there was bad news to be shouldered, President Carter told the American people about it. An exhausted, cynical populace ultimately chose Reagan in 1980 because it was easier and less tiring to believe the image of America as “the shining city” than to grapple with serious problems, or face a superpower hobbled. Reagan inspired people to have pride in their country again.

“I think Americans have gotten increasingly depressed about what they are and who they are,” suggested horror novelist Stephen King in a 1980 interview. “And I think they’ve gotten very, very anxious. A lot of the anxieties people feel are related to national events or international events that they feel they can’t control.... People feel bad about these things. They don’t know how to change them....”¹¹

Thus America saw the ascent of Reagan, the glamorous Hollywood actor, the man with a great smile, and a master of the quick comeback. Subconsciously, at least, some citizens understood full well that America was living on borrowed time in the early 1980s, before the recession of the early 1990s hit. That is certainly the reason why horror movies began to reflect the schism of Reagan’s two terms as president. Under the surface, beneath the *don’t worry* exterior, everyone knew that pain was coming, and it would be time to *be afraid* once more.

The vast majority of horror films in the 1980s came from the low-budget school known as “the slasher film,” which more often than not featured teenagers in remote locations (like a summer camp) under

siege by masked psycho-killers. Yet these simple, tightly structured films actually boasted the self-same *Don't Worry, Be Happy/Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid* dichotomy evident in the nation's political and social discourse.

On one hand, the teen protagonists in these films could be depicted partying with abandon, often smoking weed or even, in some cases, snorting lines of cocaine. Likewise, the shot of an attractive young woman taking off her bra and revealing her breasts for the camera—usually before indulging in premarital sex—became the most common shot in the decade's horror films.

And, lest we forget it, the latest advances in special effects prosthetics (usually masterminded by maestro Tom Savini) often depicted graphic gore and blood in a new and profoundly explicit way.

The flip side of these freedoms and excesses, however, came in the thematic subtext of these films. It was not hard to divine that these slasher movies appeared designed and executed as conservative precautionary tales. Although the Moral Majority and conservatives railed violently against popular horror films in the 1980s, the very movies they loathed actually toed the party-line with dedication.

To wit, a display of vice (drugs and sex) would invariably precede the slice-and-dice (a new kind of capital punishment!). The actual content of these films may have been quite naughty, skirting the very edge of socially accepted mores and taboos about violence and sexuality, but most of the films also carried the conservative (and contradictory) theme that if you sin, punishment shall be meted out.

Films of this breed included *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981), *Happy Birthday to Me* (1982), *My Bloody Valentine* (1982), *Graduation Day* (1982) and their brethren. They invited viewers to voyeuristically enjoy nudity and gore, but then slapped the viewers down for doing so, warning that such “dangerous” behaviors could result in an untimely death.

Body image was another perennial source of the *Don't Worry, Be Happy/Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid* dichotomy in '80s horror films. And again, this grew directly out of the decade's schizophrenic Zeitgeist.

On the one hand, the country was enmeshed in a fitness craze spurred by Jane Fonda's aerobic videos, Olivia Newton John songs such as her number one hit, “Physical,” and dance movies like *Flashdance* (1983) which popularized leg-warmers and off-the-shoulder ripped

sweatshirts. Why, there was even a *Parade* magazine cover shoot depicting President Reagan pumping iron (“How to Stay Fit!”) from December 4, 1983. Gorgeous, perfectly toned bodies were definitely “in,” as movies like *Staying Alive* (1983) and the aptly named *Perfect* (1985) demonstrated.

But on the other hand—the *Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid* hand—the nation also suffered in the 1980s under the weight of AIDS. Among the terrible symptoms was the slow destruction of the body, a mutiny from within.

Body perfect/body destroyed.

Horror movies were quick to pick up the mantel of bodily transformation as a key element of horror cinema. The 1982 remake of *Cat People* treaded such turf. A lonely woman played by Nastassja Kinski feared that she would “transform” into a murderous wildcat if she were to attain orgasm with a lover, showcasing again the decade’s fear of sex and disease, and simultaneous the worship of sex and beauty.

The year 1981 saw the release of “werewolf” films such as *The Howling* and *An American Werewolf in London*. On first glances, these seemed like simple 1980s updates of classics such as *The Wolf Man* (1941), but again, the films focused on the transformation of the human body; on the mutation of youth and good looks into monstrous parodies of normality. The fear was of subversion by disease; of losing the very allure, those “buns of steel,” the culture demanded of its people.

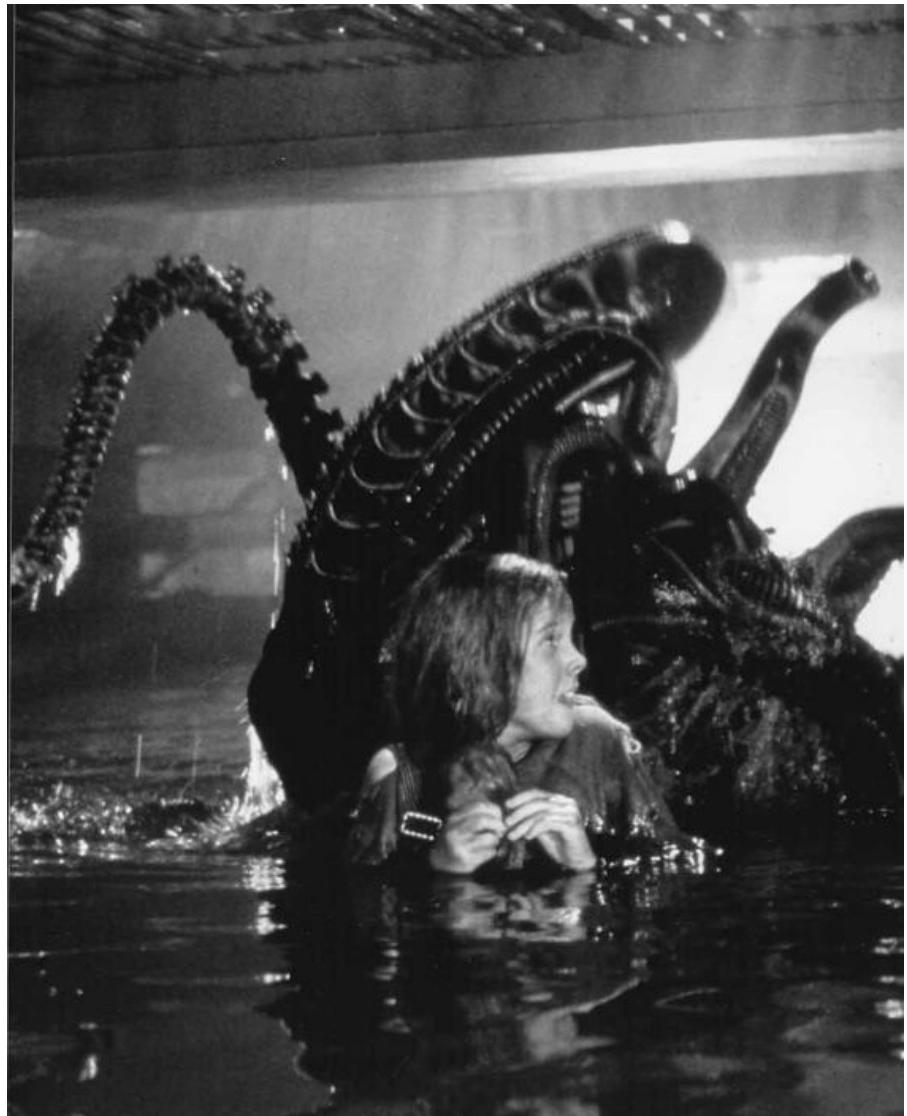
The paradigm that ultimately supplanted the slasher aesthetic, called “rubber reality” (after Wes Craven’s name for it), also revealed the conflicted nature of the decade. In these films, a supernatural world (the dimension of dreams/nightmares in the *Elm Street* movies; Hell in *Hellraiser* [1987], and so forth) co-existed uneasily with our consensus reality, and characters would wander back and forth from one to the other without foreknowledge or even sometimes cinematic transition.

Reality flowed directly into dreamscapes, and so these movies were signaling the uneasy co-existence of the world we were supposed to enjoy and profit from (*Don’t Worry*) and the one that we should fear, right at hand.

Another two-sided, *Don’t Worry/Be Afraid* conflict came in the manner that Hollywood depicted the Yuppie lifestyle in horror films of the

decade.

Perhaps *Poltergeist* (1982), directed by Tobe Hooper, was the ultimate example of a film that attempted to have its cake and eat it too. On one hand, this was the story of the American dream realized. A suburban family, the Freelings, lives in an ideal tract home and California suburb. They have cable TV, the national average of 2.5 children, and Daddy Freeling, Steve, is a successful (and oh so slick) real estate agent.



Behind you! Little Carrie Henn (Newt) is menaced by one of the terrifying xenomorph drones in James Cameron's militarized

sequel, *Aliens* (1986).

“We have a saying here,” he obsequiously tells a prospective house buyer in the community: “The grass grows greener on every side.”

By night, Steve Freeling smokes a little dope with his wife (a holdover from the 1960s) and reads passages from the book *Reagan: The Man, the President*. Why, the family is even putting a swimming pool in the backyard... It’s the perfect middle-class American life.

But that “perfect” dream world is ripped away from Steven and his family when malevolent ghosts stake a claim on the house. Seems there’s a dark underbelly—a price to be paid for ownership of this particular chunk of prime real estate. A few years back, Mr. Freeling’s boss made a business decision. He moved a cemetery ... but just the headstones, not the graves. Now Freeling is living over those corpses, and they aren’t very happy about how they’ve been treated. Forget Tangina the happy medium, these trampled spirits really needed the help of advocate Ralph Nader!

The *Poltergeist* scenario is a perfect metaphor for the 1980s because one of Reagan’s trademarks as commander in chief was to offer simplistic, often humorous answers to complex problems. Whether it was drugs (“Just say no!”), or a recession (“Just cut taxes!”), the answer was always basic, and always good for business. When faced with facts counter to his argument, all Reagan had to say to his opponent was “There you go again,” and a nation laughed at his plucky wit and charm.

Here the (short-sighted) answer in *Poltergeist* was: just move the headstones. You won’t have to worry about ghosts (or poverty, or deficits), you’ll just have to worry about raking in more money. But what *Poltergeist* accurately forecasted was the truth that budget deficits, like angry spirits, have a nasty habit of rising up and biting you in the backside, as George Bush learned during his one-term presidency.

So *Poltergeist* both champions the yuppie dream (making the lifestyle appealing to viewers), and then pulls the rug out from under it. The film says that not only are the greedy punished, but also those who benefit from the greed and moral lassitude of the community. The Freelines suffer through hell not because they committed a crime, but because they prospered by the corrupt policies of Steve’s firm. In other words, we’re all guilty if we profit from ill-gotten spoils.

Director Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) was a touchstone of the decade, and another genre effort (replete with butcher-knife wielding maniac) that reflected the two sides of Yuppie America.

On one hand, Yuppie icon Michael Douglas was certainly deemed immoral for stepping outside the bonds of holy matrimony for a dalliance with sexy, single Glenn Close, but on the other, America thirsted for her blood because she threatened the American dream: a perfect home in Connecticut, a beautiful wife (played by Anne Archer) and a cute kid. Audiences so much wanted to see the "other woman" pay for her trespasses that the film was re-cut to include a bloody "siege" finale in a bathroom, replete with a drowning and a shooting.

Of course, Michael Douglas's character hadn't needed much goading to have the fling in the first place, had he? His character could be forgiven, whereas she couldn't.

Significantly, the American family in the 1980s (the decade of the mega-hit family sitcoms *Family Ties* [1982–89] and *The Cosby Show* [1984–92]) became a battleground for horror in Reagan's decade; an acknowledgment, perhaps, that all was not well there. Films such as *The Stepfather* (1987) and *Parents* (1989) are two examples of horror coming home to roost in the "nuclear" family unit.

Wes Craven's "rubber reality" pioneer, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is yet another 1980s horror landmark that exposes the danger of the yuppie lifestyle, and a lifetime of putting off credit card payments (and interest payments on the deficit, etc.) for another day.

Elm Street is a literal reading of the theme that the sins of the father are visited upon the heads of the children. In this case, the parents of suburban Elm Street have rid themselves of a particularly nasty child molester named Freddy Krueger. But they have done so illegally, so that Freddy has been granted license to return and haunt the nightmares of their children for years to come.

It is not difficult to detect that Freddy is the price that children will pay for the economic and moral lapses of the previous generation. Again, this is particularly relevant in the eighties because many critics saw Reagan as an absent, doddering father, ultimately uninvolved in the problems of his "kids," and not really working to solve the problem, but instead offering warmed-over homilies and down-home wisdom.

Down-home wisdom and a turn of phrase, alas, doesn't keep the

boogeyman (or the tax collector) at bay for long.

In addition to the simultaneous selling/critiquing of yuppie values, 1980s horror cinema remains famous (or infamous) for another trend that ran rampant in the 1980s: the popularization and proliferation of franchises, or rather, name brand movies.

In the 1980s, it was no longer good enough to own good clothes. Instead, you had to wear *the right* (expensive) brands to school. Fashion came with names such as Izod, Britannia, Le Tigre, Polo, and OP. Because everything down to your Nike sneakers suffered from the “bigger and better” syndrome in the 1980s, this meant that movies also, inevitably, had to boast the equivalent of brand names. Every mild cinematic success thus had to produce a sequel.

Or in some cases, two.

Before the decade was out, there had been eight *Friday the 13th* films, five *A Nightmare on Elm Street* films, four *Halloweens*, three *Silent Night, Deadly Night* installments, two *Prom Nights*, two *Critters*, two *Hellraisers*, and more.

Films that should never have been made in the first place ended up producing sequels (*Ghoulies 2*, anybody?). This trend occurred because the home video market opened up the possibility of multiple viewing for the first time in the history of cinema.

As always, TV stations could certainly rerun old films, but viewers had been at the tender mercy of network scheduling in that medium. Not so anymore. One visit to a local video store in the 1980s, and a fan could easily and safely gravitate to a *Friday the 13th* sequel or a *Halloween* sequel and be assured a certain level of quality. Name recognition trumped an untried, untested quantity every time.



When Good Guy Dolls Go Bad: Chucky's at the door in 1988's *Child's Play*, which spawned three sequels in the 1990s.

Perhaps the ultimate brand name in the 1980s belonged to the King of Horror himself, novelist Stephen King. In 1976, his book *Carrie* had been adapted to the screen with great success by Brian De Palma, and in the 1980s, Hollywood attempted to recreate that magic. If King's books were bestsellers, why couldn't films based on his books be

blockbusters? Good question. The answer was that some could and some couldn't, depending on the director assigned the project and the storyline's capacity to be made cinematic.

Of King's books, genre historian and writer Harlan Ellison had this thought: "It is the *style* in which they are written that gives them wing. They are memorable not because of the thin storylines, but because the manner in which they have been written is so compelling that we are drawn into the fictional universe and once there, we are bound subjects of the master creator."¹²

A thin, two-hour, dramatic interpretation of a lengthy prose just couldn't compare to the suspenseful and colorful writing style that had such power on the page. For instance, *Christine* is a beautifully constructed novel, but no matter the talent involved, the film still feels hackneyed; a movie, ultimately about an evil, self-repairing automobile. How do you make that concept plausible to the audience's eyes? King conjures powerful, disturbing images with words, but presented plainly on the silver screen for all to see, the same images often feel underwhelming.

Still, the sheer number of King adaptations was impressive, as was the talent involved. Stanley Kubrick adapted *The Shining* (1980), John Carpenter adapted *Christine* (1983), David Cronenberg lensed *The Dead Zone* (1983), George A. Romero shot an anthology of King tales called *Creepshow* (1982), and that was just the top tier. Before the decade was over, *Cujo* (1983), *Firestarter* (1984), *Cat's Eye* (1985), *Silver Bullet* (1985), *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) and *Creepshow 2* (1987) came down the pike to form an unofficial King movie franchise.

Very few of these efforts were more than mildly successful in their original runs, establishing what Ellison understood so well: that King was a property people wanted to read, not necessarily visit on the silver screen.

A big trend in '80s horror cinema was not just reflecting the dichotomy of the Reagan era, but the unspoken belief that more and bigger was *always* preferable to restraint and originality. This belief resulted in a glut of horror movies that don't all stand the test of time. I reviewed 225 films for *Horror Films of the 1970s*. Here, the number is closer to 328, and it is downright disconcerting to realize that there is simply much less variation in 1980s horror cinema than one might prefer.

You'll find an abundance of Stephen King-inspired material, a glut of slashers, a surfeit of "rubber reality" (the successor to the slasher paradigm), but generally, quality is not so high as it appeared in the 1970s, when a wide variety in subject matter and approaches to cinema was represented. Most of the murderous pack described in these pages are merely mediocre; competently achieved efforts but ones ultimately feeding off the life force of the last big hit, whether that was *Friday the 13th*, a *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Aliens*.

Ultimately, horror movies were the victims of their own success by the end of the 1980s. Horror remained so dominant by the end of the 1980s that fans could even see continuations of their favorite franchises (*Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) on syndicated television shows. Saturation and then the onset of boogeyman fatigue was inevitable. A survey by the National Coalition on TV violence found late in the decade that sixty percent of children ages 10–13 recognized Freddy Krueger; compared to only 33 percent who recognized Abraham Lincoln.¹³ It's awfully hard to stay scary when your face is so well known. Ultimately, the 1980s horror explosion resulted in a 1990s horror contraction, a genre recession.

But that's a campfire story for another day (and another book). So—*Omigod!*—tie on your bandannas, flip up that collar, and put your *Thriller* cassette in that Sony Walkman. We're headed back to the future, a time when Ronnie and Freddy ruled America, and dead teenagers piled up like jelly beans. We'll survey this world of Rubik's Cube, Tab Soda (and New Coke!), TRS 80s and My Little Pony, and in the process, examine a genre in blistering ascent, moving—*perhaps in retrospect*—too fast for its own survival.

So to coin a phrase, *let's book*.

A History of the Dead Teenager Decade

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, one might conclude while writing about the United States of America in the 1980s. It was a decade when fears of a nuclear apocalypse reached a crescendo, and yet also the era that saw the stirring of a “New World Order” and the end of the Cold War with the U.S.S.R.

It was simultaneously a decade of military weakness (the failed rescue mission in Iran under President Carter; the terrorist bombing in Lebanon under President Reagan) and military strength (in Libya and Grenada).

It was a decade of huge gains in the stock market, yet also the decade of “Black Monday,” October 19, 1987, when the market plunged over 508 points in one day, a loss representing over \$500 billion dollars in lost assets.

Simply put, it was a time not to worry, to be happy ... and a time to be afraid, *very afraid*.

The horror movies of the 1980s reflected this contradiction, and also brought the genre closer to the mainstream culture than in any decade that had come before.

Classic iconic horror characters like Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster and the Mummy appeared infrequently during Reagan’s era (starring only in throwback, nostalgic fare like *The Monster Squad* [1987] and *Waxwork* [1988]). Instead, for the first time, a new coterie of popular boogeyman rose to prominence. They bore relatively innocuous names like Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*), Michael Myers (*Halloween II*), Freddy Krueger (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*), and Chucky (*Child’s Play*), proving that Americans in the 1980s feared terror from sources you wouldn’t necessarily expect. Not the result of ambitious scientists or vampires, but from “regular” joes perverted by evil: a child who drowned, was disfigured and brought back to life; a homicidal trick-or-treater with the ability to absorb bullets; a child molester transformed by his victims’ sins (and souls...) into something much, much worse.

For every Jason or Freddy, there were two or three challengers to the throne, a *Slumber Party Massacre* here, a *Sleepaway Camp* there. High schools, universities, summer camps, mountain cabins and suburban houses were all populated by psychos, sickos and madmen, villains who wanted nothing more than to destroy incorruptible youth (represented by 1980s teenagers).

Let's commence there, with one of the most controversial schools of horror films ever fashioned: The Slasher.

The Slasher Paradigm in 1980s Horror Cinema

The slasher subgenre may always remain horror's red-headed stepchild. It has often been termed the genre's "most disreputable form."¹ In his careful and supportive study of the subgenre, scholar Adam Rockoff, author of *Going to Pieces: The Rise and the Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978–1986* (McFarland; 2002), concluded that slashers (or stalkers, as they are sometimes called) represent a "rogue genre" with films "tough, problematic, and fiercely individualistic."²

Other sources were noticeably less even-handed about slasher movies during the 1980s. In fact, the slasher subgenre has been outright reviled for a quarter-century. Politicians hoping to score points with "family values viewers," movie reviewers sick of each new variation on a theme, and even sociologists have all taken turns damning the form. Their primary beef is that it represents a bad influence on society and encourages violence in moviegoers. Plus, *they're* anti-women, insist some. Movie critics are more practical. On a purely technical level, they insist examples of the form tend to be poorly made. All these arguments have floated in the pop-culture ether since the 1980s and the heyday of *Friday the 13th*.

Movie critic Tom O'Brien, writing in *Commonweal*, even had a personal prescription for curing the ills of the slasher film: censorship. He makes his case below:

Without a dramatic point to violent films, why not classify them as a kind of pornography—give them an X or a Z rating and use law and social pressure to limit their distribution? This is especially pertinent to *Friday the 13th* ... the movie simply literalizes the violence against women ... [that] feminist groups have identified as the core of pornography.³

Even the most artistic and esteemed practitioners of the slasher form, including virtuoso visualist Brian De Palma, heir to Alfred Hitchcock and director of *Dressed to Kill* (1980), took some hard knocks for “lowering” himself and participating in the genre. Zina Klapper in *Ms. Magazine* reacted this way to De Palma’s work, and the terrain of his chosen subject matter:

One might legitimately claim that the jury is still out on the subject of whether films like De Palma’s actually induce violence. But can they affect our every day actions—say, inhibit the behavior of women, or rouse fears of independence? Dearth of evidence or no, you will never convince me that those aren’t exactly the effects of the films of Brian De Palma.⁴

Amazingly, this critic readily admits that her mind is *already* closed, despite contrary evidence. Present any proof you might like about the social value of the slasher, and still you won’t convince her. That’s the kind of blind moral superiority and self-righteous certainty that the slasher film faced in the 1980s and in the years beyond.

Klapper’s admittedly irrational and unfounded response to slashers is not unique. The attacks truly knew no bounds, and even esteemed writers like *The New York Times*’ reviewer Janet Maslin carved out space to deplore the genre. She savaged the slasher trend in 1982, in a piece entitled “Bloodbaths Debase Movies and Audiences”:

To say that these films aren’t very frightening is not to say that they don’t have a profound effect on those who watch them. Go see one, and you’ll have empirical proof that a film like this makes audiences mean. You leave the theater convinced that the world is an ugly, violent place in which aggression is frequent and routine.⁵

Empirical proof? What empirical proof? Did slasher films make the sun stop shining? Or measurably poison the air? I would be curious to know precisely what empirical proof connects these movies to the quality of the world outside the theater.

Funny, but I leave a good, well-executed slasher film (like *Halloween* [1978], *When a Stranger Calls* [1979], *Friday the 13th* [1980] or *Scream* [1996]) not feeling horrible and gloomy, but *exhilarated*; having run a

gauntlet, or survived a challenge. Slasher films provoke a feeling of catharsis, not a reckoning that the people who saw the movie are somehow “evildoers.” Maslin’s criticism reveals more about her world view than the film cycle she’s expended such effort to describe.

No less a mainstream critic than the influential Roger Ebert famously derided the slashers as “dead teenager films,” decrying the very tenets underlining the form. This is a surprise and a disappointment, because Ebert is usually the first to applaud a good horror film. Over the years he even defended *Last House on the Left*, which proves he’s not a knee-jerk hater of horror. But in his review of *Friday the 13th Part II*, Ebert nonetheless noted the following:

Sinking into my seat ... I remembered the movie fantasies when I was a kid. They involved teenagers who fell in love, made out with each other, customized their cars, listened to rock and roll, and were rebels without causes. Neither the kids in those movies nor the kids watching them would have understood a world view in which the primary function of the teenagers is to be hacked to death.⁶

Yes, Mr. Ebert, but *why* didn’t those kids from your adolescence understand this world dynamic?

Hadn’t the world changed a great deal in the interval since the 1950s and the 1980s? The teenagers of the 1950s had not grown up every day of its young life with the specter of nuclear Armageddon; had not lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis, Three Mile Island, or even the assassinations of revered men like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. That world of “innocence” and “rebels without causes” could not have conceived the fall of a corrupt president, the shootings at Kent State, the Vietnam War aired on prime time TV news, illegal bombing in Cambodia, the Energy Crisis, the United States held hostage by an Islamic regime, let alone Charles Manson.

This fascination with death and even global annihilation, the so-called “apocalypse mentality,” was expressed not just in the films of the 1980s, but throughout the youth culture as a whole.

“The stalker film gained popularity,” writes Vera Dika, “in a period that saw ... the rise of punk music and punk fashion....”⁷ The punk ethos, according to Dika, had reversed the 1960s aesthetic of the “peace generation” with a more harsh, ugly sense of artificiality,

which included such elements as violence and sadism. This wasn't the slasher movies making the world uglier, as Maslin feared, but slashers as a response to the ugliness of the world that was already out there.

Considering the history leading up to the 1980s, the slashers arrived in movie theaters during a time when teens wondered if there would be a tomorrow. Can it come as a total surprise that this generation's entertainment of choice concerns a crucible of survival in which only the clever, the moral, the resolute, and the resourceful manage to survive an apocalyptic world that seemed stacked against them? One wherein evil always resurfaces, even after defeated? Slasher movies don't make audiences meaner; they simply take the real world as it already is and demonstrate to teens that they *can* survive it, especially with the right skill set.

Not all slasher movies are good and the real problem with them is simply that many are about making money rather than actually being good, scary movies. The slasher films abounded in such numbers in the 1980s because they speak incisively to the generation that enjoyed them, and the manner in which that generation viewed the unfolding world and its multiple threats (nuclear war, gang warfare, AIDS, etc). Is that sad? That a generation should find solace and catharsis in a bloody entertainment? Perhaps, perhaps not.

For at least the slasher film at its best certainly concerns the idea of confronting something dark and dangerous rather than ignoring the problem. The slasher is not a balm to take your mind off bad times (like the musicals of the 1930s were). It's not a harmless make-out movie about interpersonal crises (like the teen films of the fifties) Indeed, the very theme of Wes Craven's rubber-reality modified slasher film, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, was knowing when to face your problems.

There, Craven's 16-year-old heroine (Heather Langenkamp) won't countenance the lies of her mother (a teen of the 1950s), and like some distaff genre version of the prince of Denmark, keeps digging to discover the truth about her mother and the "threats" to Nancy's world.

This comparison to *Hamlet* is reflected in the very text of the film, as Langenkamp's character, Nancy Thompson, discusses Hamlet in her high school English class. Her teacher notes that Hamlet stamps out the lies of his mother, as Nancy shall do in the course of the film, regarding Freddy and her mother's complicity in her death. Likewise, the slasher films express something valuable about the things bubbling

under the surface of American society and history. A generation was growing up in fear that the end would come soon, and that they might not survive.

Within the film industry, slasher films existed in the 1980s for a very specific set of reasons. In the 1970s, filmmakers including Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven and John Carpenter in efforts such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Halloween* (1978) took “the new freedoms” of cinema to their furthest apogee: the shattering of cinematic taboos such as rape, cannibalism and horrific murders.

In doing so, these auteurs created a kind of “savage cinema,” but more importantly than that, a profitable one. Their films were produced cheaply, without Hollywood stars, and they raked in tremendous profits. The slasher film was an attempt to recreate the financial success of these films, particularly *Halloween*, the most successful independent film of all time, having grossed more than \$55 million on a budget of less than \$500,000.

“Anyone with a minimum of technical equipment can rent an old house by the sea, buy a set of carving knives and put a young, sexually attractive woman in the house by herself,” wrote Michael Blowen in *The Boston Globe*. “Add an escapee from a prison/mental hospital or a mad mother in the bushes outside and you’ve got yourself a movie.”⁸

Thus, mounting a slasher film was seen as easy and cheap. And because little money was needed to create them, they had a much better chance of being successful, even if their box office run was brief. They were known in the industry as quick playoffs, meaning that, according to *Miami Herald* critic Bill Cosford in 1985, “they get a big first weekend at the box office on the basis of clever titles and unsubtle advertising, and slink out of town before the critics and/or word of mouth can catch up with them.”



Yes, Virginia, there is a slasher paradigm. There's a secret in final girl Virginia Wainright's (Melissa Sue Anderson) past in *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981).

This statement is relevant because 1980s slasher movies were often highly successful at the box office, and much criticized by the critical community. One would be hard pressed to find a good mainstream review of *Friday the 13th*, yet on a budget of approximately seven hundred thousand dollars, it raked in more than forty million dollars,⁹ which astounded Hollywood bean counters. Paramount had paid only 1.5 million dollars for the film, and earned back more than seventy million once worldwide receipts were counted. The film stayed perched at number two at the American box office (behind *The Empire*

Strikes Back) for seven weeks.

Some of the films Sean Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* outgrossed during the summer of 1980 included Robert Redford's *Brubaker*, Olivia Newton John's *Xanadu*, *The Final Countdown*, *Used Cars*, *Cheech and Chong's Next Movie* and the re-release of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Even *Prom Night*, a much less successful slasher film, grossed over fourteen million dollars that summer. On an investment of less than two million, it was still an unqualified success. You can't argue with those numbers, no matter how hard you try.

Because slashers were cheap and the bar for success was relatively low (especially after the emergence of the VCR and video rentals), the subgenre also proved the perfect testing ground in the 1980s for young talents vetting their first projects, hoping to distinguish themselves.

A modicum of cinematic style in one of these films, and a big-opening weekend, could result in the start of a big career. "Horror films have always been a way to break into movie making, and there are a lot of talented young people now,"¹⁰ Marvin Goldman, twice the president of the National Association of Theater Owners, told Christian Williams in the *Washington Post*. He noted that the proliferation of slasher films was a financial/economic phenomenon, rather than an artistic or societal one. Thus the arrival of the "slasher" form in the 1980s (after *Halloween* and a few other examples, like *Black Christmas* in the 1970s) represents a kind of perfect 1980s storm of context and economics working to elevate one form or subgenre over another.

Now that the case against the slasher film has been laid out, it's time to talk about what it actually is. The best way to do that is to dissect the mad slasher films into their component parts. Just like Shakespeare or Ka-buki theatre, slasher films are highly stylized works of art, and virtually every one utilizes the same play book, the same dramatic structure and identical *dramatis personae*. The joy of the slasher film arises in recognizing these components, and detecting how they are shuffled, subverted and re-used in new and sometimes surprising fashion from film to film.

Convention One: The Organizing Principle

A facet beyond mere setting or location, the organizing principle provides the slasher production a series of connected *leitmotifs* that grant a narrative an umbrella of unity. The organizing principle is

film's central idea, and the place where the outline for a successful slasher film begins.

For example, what if a producer seeks to create a so-called knife-kill film called *The Librarian*? The organizing principle is the main location, a public library. But more than that, the location brings with it a whole set of "exploitable" elements that are related to the central conceit: a card catalogue, a drop-off box, rows and rows of shelves, books, and more. So, a decapitated head might be discovered in the drop-off box; the key to the killer's identity might be catalogued, Dewey Decimal style, and the final chase might occur back in the labyrinth of rows.

The library provides more than these leitmotifs. It also provides a lead character, a book-smart college student conducting research for a history paper, let's say, and—of course—the villain, a psycho librarian who flies off the handle every time a book is returned late, and then hides the bodies in the stacks or the drop-off box. This psychosis arises from a crime in the past, perhaps a childhood visit to the library when the future evil librarian was scolded by a mean reference desk worker.

The organizing principle is what every slasher film ultimately hangs its hooks upon. It is the key to every aspect of the film: from setting and character motivations to mode of kills and even final chase.

In *Friday the 13th*, for instance, the organizing principle is "Camp Blood," a summer camp at Crystal Lake. This organizing principle provides the *dramatis personae* or victim pool (camp counselors) a physically isolated location (cabins by the lake), a variety of weapons (archery bows and arrows, etc.), and also the site of a past crime (Jason's drowning).

Let's consider a second example. The organizing principle of *Terror Train* is not the train itself, but rather magic or illusion ... trickery. Master magician David Copperfield appears in the film as a red herring (a distraction); there is a magic show on the train at a critical juncture, and the identity of the killer rests on how much the viewer trusts what he or she sees. The killer spends time shifting costumes in the film, so members of the victim pool believe they are talking to friends, when in fact they've been tricked into conversing with a killer.

The organizing principle of *Happy Birthday to Me* is, as the title suggests, the world associated with birthday parties. The climax of the film appropriately revolves around a party at which all the attendees

are victims (corpses). But everything has been leading up to that big moment. A crime in the past occurred on the main character's birthday, and this is the anniversary of that date.

The organizing principle in *He Knows You're Alone* is a wedding and its attendant preparations. The final girl (Caitlin O'Heaney) is a bride-to-be, one of the victims is her tailor, another her bridesmaid, and the final sting-in-the tail/tale—a crucial element of the slasher format— involves the actual ceremony and the “birth” of a new bride murderer.

In the 1980s, the organizing principle is most frequently a holiday or special event day. Spurred on by the success of *Halloween*, *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) deals with the details of February 14: valentines cards, “hearts” and even a love triangle.

In *New Years Evil* (1983) the organizing principle is the last day of the year as a killer skulks from time-zone to time-zone murdering innocent victims as the New Year rolls in. Not surprisingly, the film heavily features a New Year's Eve Party.

April Fool's Day is a parody of the genre and focuses on practical jokes. Indeed the whole film is a practical joke, a hoax.

Often the organizing principle is not officially a holiday but as noted above a special event (or the anniversary of a special event), like the wedding of *He Knows You're Alone*. *Graduation Day* and *Prom Night* play on the terrain of high school customs, which provide a good victim pool (young, nubile students), and other useful elements such as yearbook photos, prom night celebrations, the track team and the locker room.

In virtually every case and in virtually every slasher film, the organizing principle provides every ingredient the movie will require to thrive, a whole world of connections on which to hang the macabre tale. This is especially important because the slasher film is, by its nature, episodic. The narrative in most slasher films is a series of stitched-together set pieces in which the killer stalks and kills a particular victim. When that victim dies, it's time to move on to the next set piece. The organizing principle gathers all the episodes together and grants them a consistency of location, character and setting.

Below is a chart that illustrates the organizing principle's usefulness in making a slasher film's elements cohere.

Friday the 13th—Organizing Principle: Summer Camp; Settings: camp, cabins, lake, woods; Crime in the Past: a drowning; negligence; Victim Pool: camp counselors

He Knows You're Alone—Organizing Principle: Weddings; Settings: dress shop, bride's home, church; Crime in the Past: bride jilts fiancé; Victim Pool: wedding party, tailor

Night School—Organizing Principle: College; Settings: classrooms, teacher's home, Dean's home; Crime in the Past: infidelity; Victim Pool: students, dean of college

Prom Night—Organizing Principle: Prom Night; Settings: high school; Crime in the Past: accident at school; Victim Pool: prom goers who participated in accident

The Dorm that Dripped Blood—Organizing Principle: The Dorm; Settings: college campus, dorm; Crime in the Past: unpopularity with students; Victim Pool: college students

Final Exam—Organizing Principle: Exam Week; Settings: college campus, class rooms, dorms, weight room; Crime in the Past: NA; Victim Pool: college students

Friday the 13th Part II—Organizing Principle: Summer Camp; Settings: camp, cabins, lake, woods; Crime in the Past: murder of Ms. Voorhees; Victim Pool: camp counselors in training

Graduation Day—Organizing Principle: Track Team; Settings: track field, high school, locker room, prom; Crime in the Past: death of a young track student; Victim Pool: track coach, track team members

Happy Birthday to Me—Organizing Principle: Birthday; Settings: college, birthday party; Crime in the Past: family break up on birthday; Victim Pool: birthday party invitees

The Prowler—Organizing Principle: Jilted Lover; Settings: school Dance; Crime in the Past: Dear John letter; Victim Pool: young lovers at dance

The Burning—Organizing Principle: Summer Camp; Settings: camp, cabins, lake, woods, island; Crime in the Past: an accidental burning; Victim Pool: campers, counselors

Slumber Party Massacre—Organizing Principle: Slumber Party; Settings: high school locker room, slumber party location (a house), next door; Crime in the Past: NA; Victim Pool: slumber party goers

Curtains—Organizing Principle: Acting; Settings: a casting retreat weekend (replete with basement prop room and dance room); Crime in the Past: losing an important role; Victim Pool: young ingénues; older actress, director

Sleepaway Camp—Organizing Principle: summer camp; Settings: camp, cabins, lake, woods ; Crime in the Past: twisted sex role; Victim Pool: camp employees, campers

The Initiation—Organizing Principle: sororities; Settings: sorority house, campus, site of “Prank Week”; Crime in the Past: witnessing of a

burning and infidelity; *Victim Pool*: pledges, frat boys

Silent Night, Deadly Night—Organizing Principle: Christmas; Settings: department store at Christmas; Christmas Eve; Crime in the Past: Santa Claus kills parents; *Victim Pool*: naughty teens

Terror at Tenkiller—Organizing Principle: vacation at a lake; Settings: cabin, lake, local diner; Crime in the Past: NA; *Victim Pool*: vacationers

Convention Two: The Deadly Preamble/The Crime in the Past/The Transgression

In *The Prowler*, a jilted soldier arrives home from World War II only to find his loved one at a dance with another boy. He kills her and the boyfriend with a pitchfork.

Two camp counselors are murdered by an unseen assailant in 1958 at “Camp Blood” after a little boy drowns in Crystal Lake in *Friday the 13th*, and a little girl falls to her death during a game with other children in *Prom Night*. These story points represent the deadly preamble in the slasher format, most often the first scene of a film.

Halloween has a shocking opener: Young Michael Myers (dressed as a clown to celebrate October 31) murders his sister with a butcher knife and is found by his parents. Other slashers adopted this formula for two reasons. One is wholly narrative: it provides a reason for the murders in the film—a wrong that must be righted.

Secondly, the deadly preamble starts the film off with a bang, which is all but a necessity in the age of MTV and video-editing ... what many critics termed “short attention span theater.” One may notice while watching slasher films that (not unlike the later James Bond films) these productions basically consist of a series of loosely connected set pieces. In slasher films, they’re self-contained “kill sequences,” wherein one victim is stalked and killed in a most horrible way, and usually with a highly individual weapon.

The deadly preamble is the equivalent of James Bond’s pre-title sequence. It demonstrates immediately to an audience that the film means business. A gruesome murder is depicted, and this terrible crime is the very thing that will set off another killing spree in the future (the remainder of the film). Narratively it provides immediate interest, and dynamically, it starts the movie off with a bang.

The Deadly Preamble (or Crime in the Past) often involves a specific and heinous act of transgression, moral, sexual or social. The

transgression is a terrible deed that so scars and traumatizes a person that he or she becomes a committed psychotic killer. The victim pool in the slasher film sometimes (as in *Prom Night*) consists of the very souls who committed the transgressions. Sometimes, however, the victims are people who simply “symbolize” the transgressors. For instance, in *Don’t Open Till Christmas*, a boy who once saw Santa doing something naughty with Mommy grows up to kill everybody dressed in a St. Nick costume. He has generalized his antisocial behavior to hate all Santas, not the one who literally acted badly.

Convention Three: Character Archetypes (Or, The Killer and the Victim Pool)

Thanks to the enterprising and ingenious scholar Carol Clover, nearly every admirer of the slasher film is familiar with the postulate of the final girl in 1980s cinema. The final girl is a critically important component of these efforts, but is just one among many stock characters repeated in the stalker-slasher cycle. Together, these “off-the-shelf” characters formulate the victim pool.

A. The Killer

The killer in the slasher film paradigm is often a character who has been wronged and has suffered a terrible transgression, the crime in the past. This act is the precipitating factor in “flipping” a person from normal to homicidal. In *Friday the 13th*, Mrs. Voorhees is on a vendetta against all camp counselors because two negligent counselors in 1958 let her son drown.

The killer is usually dressed differently than the others, marking him as an “other.” This unofficial uniform often consists of a mask, another coded representation of other-ness or unacceptability in mainstream society. Jason wears a potato sack and then a hockey mask, Freddy a fedora, The Shape a William Shatner mask, the villain in *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) a miner’s helmet, the killer in *The Prowler* a gas mask.

As with any rule, exceptions exist. Sometimes killers are represented as human and appear normal, but most often in the paradigm, a uniform marks the killer as outside the human race. This is crucial because slashers, though created from psychological trauma, are “faceless,” indestructible monsters in many 1980s films. For all their emotions and foibles, they might as well be cyborgs.

The killer is also differentiated from the other characters by another

accouterment: the weapon of mass destruction. Often times, a killer will select armament that ties into a film's organizing principle. In *My Bloody Valentine*, which concerns a mine, the killer wields a pick-axe. *The Prowler* goes nowhere without his pitchfork. Michael prefers a butcher knife. Jason's favorite WMD is a machete. The weapon serves as an embodiment of the slasher figure's rage and is thus also a distinguishing marker, not unlike the uniform. In the slasher film, it's never hard to distinguish the killer. As a character in *Jason Lives!* notes: "I've seen enough horror movies to know any guy wearing a mask isn't friendly."

B. Bitches, Practical Jokers, & Jocks

The duration of most slasher films is spent in the company of teenage characters. They get chased and murdered by psychos. That's the form. The final girl inevitably serves as the film's protagonist, but she is always surrounded by a clique of friends who fit simple descriptions. The final girl's best friend is usually a more sexually experienced and sarcastic character, and sometimes mean-spirited—a bitch.

Another friend is the practical joker, usually a dorky kid who gets off on teasing the final girl and making an ass of himself. The practical joker serves a very useful purpose in the slasher film by setting up the false scare. Since so much of this straightforward formula hinges upon the idea that a killer is watching and readying to strike, a sudden "jolt" moment can be squeezed out of an unexpected practical joke.

Finally, there's also usually a handsome, athletic young man on hand, a jock. He can be either obnoxious or a sensitive boyfriend, and many slasher films tease audiences by suggesting that this alpha male (the traditional hero in mainstream film) will survive. Usually, he doesn't. In fact, the jock's chances of surviving a slasher film are slim, perhaps because many of the folks who write and direct horror movies are geeks themselves and have no love for the jock mentality or his popularity with girls.

C. The Cassandra Figure

Slasher films are set in remote, usually natural settings, but often times there's an old local or townie nearby who suggests to the members of the victim pool that there's danger lurking in the woods. Named after a tragic character in Greek myth, the Cassandra figure is sometimes depicted as a drunk so it is more plausible for teens to

dismiss his rambling. But who can blame the guy for drinking since no one ever believes his dire (and accurate) predictions of carnage? The Cassandra figure appears in *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981), *Just Before Dawn* (1982), *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives!* (1986) and *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan*, to name but a few.

Although *Halloween*'s Dr. Loomis is neither a crazy nor drunk, he technically fulfills the definition of a Cassandra because he constantly warns psychologists, teens and police alike about the dangers of Michael Myers and is ignored. Still, Loomis more comfortably fits into the next category.

D. Useless Authority (and the Veneer of Respectability)

Slasher films are tailor-made for the young; for the teenagers who go to theaters on Friday nights. The teens want to see themselves portrayed on screen, not some old fogey. Still, many slasher films feature the character archetype of useless authority. Sometimes the useless or ineffective authority is a therapist like Dr. Loomis in *Halloween II*, *IV* and *V* or Glenn Ford's character in *Happy Birthday to Me*. More often than not, however, useless authority is represented by a police officer, a detective attempting to catch the killer. John Saxon's Detective Thompson in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a prime example. A useless detective shows up in *He Knows You're Alone*, a useless forest ranger in *Just Before Dawn*, a useless school principal in *Prom Night*, and a useless train conductor in *Terror Train*, just to name a few.

The interesting thing about useless authority is that there's a powerful commercial reason to include them in the film. The teens might not care, but horror fans will be the first to notice that Donald Pleasence stars in *Halloween*, John Saxon in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Glenn Ford in *Happy Birthday to Me*, Leslie Nielsen in *Prom Night*, Ben Johnson in *Terror Train*, George Kennedy in *Just Before Dawn* and William Shatner in *Visiting Hours* (1982). The useless authority is frequently played by a faded marquee name, but nonetheless, the presence of such veterans instantly grants the slasher film, so derided, a veneer of respectability.

Look Mom, Martin Landau, Jack Palance and Donald Pleasence are in *Alone in the Dark* (1982)!

E. Red Herrings

Slasher movies are generally basic and straightforward affairs, so to throw audiences off the scent of the killer's real identity, it's necessary to include a distraction, a misdirection otherwise known as a red herring. The red herring is simply the character who seems most likely at any given point to actually be the killer, but who is not. Often times, the red herring is a blue collar character (which contrasts him with the white collar victim pool). The groundskeeper and custodian are always popular red herring choices, as are prison convicts. They are different just enough to appear untrustworthy or threatening, halfway between mainstream victim pool and shunned outsider slashers.

Needless to say, most slasher sequels don't feature red herrings since the killer's identity is obvious at that juncture.

F. The Final Girl

Carol J. Clover defines the final girl, the slasher paradigm's protagonist, in *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, in the following fashion:

She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise and scream again ... she alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (Ending A) or to kill him herself (Ending B).¹¹

Clover notes that the final girl is presented from the outset as the slasher film's main character, that she is not sexually active, that she is watchful, and both intelligent and resourceful. In other words, she's the perfect horror movie heroine.

More so, the final girl is the slasher film's inoculation from criticism that the form is intrinsically misogynist. The final girl is an admirable character, a survivor, and a positive role model for youngsters of both sexes.

Rather than being exploited, the final girl in the slasher paradigm is a winner, a champion. She is the one, after all, who possesses the most potent power. As Sarah Trencansky writes in *Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher Horror*:

If Freddy or Pinhead initiates the films by representing the threat that rears its head, it is the female heroines who decide how and when the story will end. Nancy and Alice control when Freddy can appear by withholding sleep or ingesting sleeping pills to initiate their final battle.¹²

Ellie Cornell, who plays Rachel, the final girl in *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers*, also believes that the good slasher films are valuable for these reasons. “I think if it weren’t the case about the final girl, that if it wasn’t true [that they are positive role models], then the first *Halloween*, which started it all, wouldn’t have gone through the roof the way it did,” the actress suggests.



This “final girl” hides under the bed. Resourceful Ginny (Amy Steel) tries to survive *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981).

“It was the first time that people got behind a girl who wasn’t stacked. Actually she was, but you couldn’t see it. But who wasn’t super beautiful and interested in sex and drugs. She was so profoundly ordinary. They made her that way on purpose. Jamie Lee Curtis is a knock-out in real life, but they really downplayed all that and just made it about smarts and outwitting Michael Myers. When you look at the roots, that’s where it all started. And I think the good ones, like

Halloween IV, maintain that.

“It’s a fascinating theory,” Cornell continues, considering the popularity of her character with the fans she meets. “It’s not about I love you, Ellie, it’s *I loved your character*. Deep down, there’s still this sense that we want to stay simple, and everything in the media is telling us to be a different way. I just find people respond to the girl-next-door because she’s simple, she’s smart. She doesn’t wear her sexuality on her sleeve. She has some dignity.”

The final girl evolves throughout the 1980s. At first, in the mold of Laurie Strode and Jamie Lee Curtis, it is enough for the final girl merely to survive a night of terror. She fends off Michael Myers until Dr. Loomis shows up and downs the Shape with six bullets (though the villain still gets up). She demonstrates resourcefulness and resilience and her accomplishment is great, but her concerns are specific and relatively time-limited: stay alive until the cavalry comes over the hill!

It wasn’t long, however, before this equation changed. With characters like Nancy Thompson in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and Kirsty in *Hellraiser* (1987), another element slipped into the mix. The final girl must actively take steps to protect herself and vanquish evil. For example, Nancy buys a survivalist, self-defense manual and in the conclusion of Craven’s *Elm Street* baits Freddy into chasing her. She then runs him through a punishing obstacle course of booby traps (including a giant sledgehammer!) Unlike Laurie, whom *Halloween* depicts as a victim of unchangeable “fate,” someone who must mount a defense on the fly, Nancy is armed for battle and ready to rock.



Final girl or next victim? One edict of the slasher paradigm demands that the final girl of the first franchise installment becomes an early victim in the second. Alice (Adrienne King) survived *Friday the 13th* (1980), but its sequel proved her undoing.

Even this stunning accomplishment was not enough for the intrepid final girl, a figure of empowerment and equality in the American cinema. Perhaps inspired by Ripley in *Aliens*, perhaps just because it was time to raise the stakes again, the last batch of 1980s final girls shouldered even greater responsibility. They not only had to survive and vanquish an opponent, they protected young wards in a recreation of the maternal relationship.

Ellie Cornell's Rachel had to not just evade and defeat Michael Myers (which she does), she had to ensure the survival of her younger sister, Jamie (Danielle Harris). Similarly, when Kirsty (Ashley Laurence) returns in *Hellbound: Hellraiser II*, she is also given an unofficial sister named Tiffany to care for. These women have to fight the bad guys and keep their families alive, which is quite a balancing act.

One glorious day, when the eighties were just a pleasant memory, the final girl would finally transcend her origins in the derided and slasher

film and “become” the thing she had always been destined to be: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Joss Whedon’s heroine is a resilient, powerful character who can protect her friends, destroy the bad guys, save the world, and manage her time effectively at home and at school. She need not be dour or sullen about it either. Rather, she evidences a joy in who she is and the task she righteously and adroitly accomplishes. She need not even be a virgin.



Who's your boyfriend now? Final girl Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) proved to be Freddy's equal—and his finest nemesis—in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

An early, protean example of this evolved final girl is visible in a 1980s film technically not in the slasher mold, *Night of the Comet*. This Thom Eberhardt film finds two self-aware, funny sisters (Catherine Mary Stewart and Kelli Maroney) countenancing the end of the world and fending off murderous zombies. They also face the task of re-building the American nuclear family and indeed the world.

“Buffy’s a good example of that, it came along ten years later or something like that,” says *Night of the Comet* director Tom Eberhardt, considering the final girl and the archetype’s maturity over the years.

“I must say that in *Halloween*, Jamie Lee Curtis—in the end—was able to grapple successfully without any help. She was able to take care of herself, but that movie was a little bit more straight-faced than our movie. I think that she didn’t have quite the sexual appeal that our girls did, for some reason. She seemed a little grim and overly focused, and not having fun whenever the opportunity presented itself, which our girls did. In that movie, the character that was most like our girls was bumped off, P.J. Soles. She was the most playful. Our girls were sort of a mix between Jamie Lee Curtis and P.J. Soles.”

The final girl may just be the best thing to come out of the slasher film paradigm and she’s indispensable. Still, not all final girls are cut from the same mold. Sometimes, the final girl is also the killer (*Night School*), or a red herring (*Happy Birthday to Me*). Sometimes she must overcome useless authority (*Visiting Hours*). Whatever other role she fulfills, the paradigm would not thrive without a focused, resourceful hero to root for.

Convention Four: Common Scenarios

The slasher movies don’t merely repeat common plot elements or character archetypes, they tend to repeat the identical scenarios and scare tactics, almost to a fault. Below is a list of the most common conventions.

A. First Scare

If the slasher movie is a sequel, like *Friday the 13th Part II*, the first kill will involve killing off the last survivor of the previous installment.

B. False Scares

Slasher movies are fun because so much of their energy involves lulling audiences into a sense of calm and safety and then unleashing a jolt or stinger. These jolts then alternate with the murders, and consequently the audience is kept on edge, leaping out of its seat and not knowing which comes next, a death or a false scare.

One of the most common jolts is the cat jump. This involves a hissing or meowing cat leaping suddenly into frame and startling a character, usually the final girl. *Anthropophagus* (1981), *Halloween II* (1981), *Funeral Home* (1982), *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) and *Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers* (1989) all feature a cat jump.

Another popular false scare involves the backwards walk or reverse jump. In real life, you may not commonly see people going in reverse, but it's a common mode of transit in the slasher film. Characters creep backwards and then—*bam!*—bump into somebody and scream. Usually, they're just backing into a friend and everybody laughs.

The last false scare is the practical joke, in which a not-very-nice friend pulls a nasty prank on a final girl, but it's all right in the end. Since many 1980s films chart the gulf between fact and fiction, real and fantasy, the practical joke is a crucial situation. In some cases (see *Terror Train*), the practical joke is also the precipitating transgression.



With hockey mask strapped to his head and a machete in hand, this imitator in Jason's guise from *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* (1985) is the perfect embodiment of the “faceless” masked serial killer populating so many of the decade’s slasher films.

C. Nature and Failed Technology

Jason isn’t the common element in every *Friday the 13th* film. What is? A storm. Nature always conspires to bring thunder, lightning and serial killers together at the same time in horror films, and that’s perhaps because the slashers (like thunderstorms) represent nature unsettled. They don’t die, they can appear anywhere at any time, and no matter how slowly they walk, they still catch up to their victims.

A storm also usually knocks out the power (and thus lights), throwing the scared survivors of a slasher’s massacre into total darkness. Again, this is important for the mood of the piece, which depends on characters being startled or surprised by sudden jolts.

The most blatant example of failed technology in the slasher film is the recurring “car won’t start” convention. Automobiles fail their heroines in *Friday the 13th Part II*, *Halloween II*, *Strange Behavior*

(1981), *Alone in The Dark* (1982), *Hell Night* (1982), *Madman* (1982), *Curtains* (1982) and *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (1984).

Interestingly the car's failure to start in the slasher film is a result not of directors attempting to startle, but rather to generate suspense. That killer is nearing, the final girl twists the key in the ignition, the car won't start. The killer gets closer, the final girl twists the keys again, the car ... starts. Whew.



Useless Authority: Linda Purl, right, tries to warn a police officer (unidentified actor) about a serial killer's assault on her family, but—as usual in the slasher paradigm—gets no traction, forcing her to handle the situation by herself. From *Visiting Hours* (1982).

D. Vice Precedes Slice-and-Dice

In a demonstration of conservative social mores, slasher knife-kills are often preceded by a display of sin or vice in the paradigm. To wit, characters will disrobe and have sex, providing the “breast part of the movie” moment. Or a character will smoke weed. Any time a character strips or lights up, an audience member can count the seconds until violent death arrives. Slasher movies like to have things both ways. They want their characters to smoke and have sex, but they also want to punish them for those transgressions.

E. The Final Chase and the Tour of the Dead

A slasher movie may be dull and stupid for much of its running time, but it always has one final opportunity to redeem itself. If the film's final chase, which usually involves only the killer and the final girl, is a good, enthralling one, the movie works. The final chase is the climax of a good slasher movie, and so it must be the high point.

The final chase is often punctuated by the tour of the dead, the moment in which the shocked final girl discovers the corpses of her buddies imaginatively arranged and splayed all over the battlefield. Corpses show up hanging on door-hooks, dropping out of the refrigerator, swinging upside down from trees, etc. The tour of the dead, like so many other elements in the slasher film, is an absolute necessity because of misdirections. Slasher movies thrive on misdirection and during the final chase the audience is focused on the pursuit; on the killer *behind* the final girl. There's no better way to foster a jolt than place something unexpected, surprising or horrific in *front* of the final girl, whose attention is understandably elsewhere. That's where the tour of the dead comes in. Simply put, the tour of the dead is something to bump into.



The game's afoot and so's the chase, an essential part of any slasher film climax. In this scene from *Prom Night* (1980), the masked killer pursues Wendy (Eddie Benton).

F. The Coup de Grâce

Slasher films generate suspense when cars won't start, jolts when the

cat jumps into frame, and nausea with one other important element: the *coup de grâce*. This is a death scene so revolting, so nauseating, so over-the-top that the audience screams in disgust. Often, the *coup de grâce* is a decapitation, apparently the worst death the slasher film can envision. One example is *He Knows You're Alone*, and the moment where a discarded, severed head is seen floating in a fish tank.

G. The Sting in the Tail/Tale

The final mandatory scenario in any good slasher film. This sting is the film's final scare, the one the audience leaves the film remembering. It can either be that instant where the dead killer jumps up for one more attack (*Friday the 13th Part II*), a dream sequence (*Friday the 13th*), or even an anxiety-releasing joke (*Night School*). In some cases, the sting-in-the-tail/tale is just a blatant hook for a sequel (*Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* [1987]). The best stings are the ones the audiences don't see coming, like the shell-shock ending of *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers*.

Convention Five: Point of View and Space Relations

In many slasher films, the camera adopts the first person, subjective view, the point of view (or P.O.V.) shot, to depict the slasher's movements around houses, through the woods and so forth. The adoption of this technique is one of the prime reasons the form has been attacked and dismissed. Some critics view this camera stance as explicitly putting the audience into the shoes and eyes of the killer; killing as he kills.

More than likely, however, the P.O.V. is commonly deployed because, like so much in the slasher paradigm, it can artfully misdirect. In other words, since the camera is simultaneously our "eye" and the character's "eye," we aren't certain who is actually doing the stalking. Why? Because we're looking the other way, out in front, not back at a face. Accordingly, the point of view could belong to the killer, or just the stupid practical joker.



The sting in the tale/tail: Ginny (Amy Steel) is unexpectedly attacked when Jason—already believed dead—rises for one more jolt. From *Friday the 13th Part II* (1982).

In addition to the P.O.V., the slasher paradigm leans on one last commonly depicted convention. The killer in many films apparently possesses an omniscient knowledge of space and victim pool location. Mysteriously, the killer somehow divines which character is alone at the right time, and then manages to target that person. The slasher is a faceless, emotionless killing machine (not unlike the shark in *Jaws*), infallible and invincible. Although occasionally the killer makes a mistake (*New Year's Evil* [1980]), the killer's infallibility is best expressed in his ability to anticipate the right victim to choose at the right time, in the right place. Therefore, there is no escape.

Journalist Peter Biskind called the slasher film “a genre every right-thinking person loves to hate.”¹³ I guess there must have been many wrong-thinking moviegoers attending slasher movies in the 1980s. By my count, no less than seventy-five slasher films were released in the years between 1980 and 1989.

Someone must have liked them, and some of the films must have had *some* inherent value. According to family psychologist John Rosemond, this is indeed the case:

First, the heroes are teens and their responses ... are creative as well as brave. Second, adolescents often are inclined toward high-risk activities, and they need safe outlets for expressing that sort of thing. Watching a movie is a relatively controlled, risk-free way of feeding the need for adventure. Besides, when you're a teenager, being scared at a movie with your friends is loads of fun.¹⁴

See? Slashers are good for you.

Rubber Reality: Beyond the Slasher Paradigm

The glut of slasher films, all adhering to the statutes of a common paradigm, had a deleterious effect on 1980s horror, at least in one regard. Audiences liked the formula but a staleness, a sameness crept into the genre. Once you see the same story twenty-five times, even a modest variation may fail to please.

As early as 1982, critics predicted the end of the road for the slasher. They did so based not only on an almost-pathological dislike for them, but on the basis that other than *Halloween* and the *Friday the 13th* series, the form simply wasn't measuring up to studio box office expectations.

"Knife-kill films, at any rate, may be due for a burial,"¹⁵ concluded journalist Robert E. Kapsis, in a piece ("Dressed to Kill") that was subtitled "At the box office that is. Under increasing pressure, horror film producers are cleaning up their act."

The solution to slasher ennui was not self-censorship, though, it involved a modification of the formula. In 1984, director Wes Craven seized on the clever idea of adding the supernatural to a paradigm that had heretofore ignored the issue. The killers in these films seemed capable of surviving any assault, but otherwise the film existed in a "real" world.

In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, however, Craven introduced a nasty demon called Freddy Krueger, a former child molester who now existed exclusively in the realm of dreams. Played with murderous glee by Robert Englund, Freddy Krueger boasted all the old tell-tale signs of a slasher, including a distinctive physical appearance and a memorable weapon of mass destruction, in this case a glove with five finger razors. However, unlike his more old-fashioned brethren,

Freddy could only strike victims in their sleep, and the film played on the notion that if a person dies in a dream, that person is dead in life too.

Violent and bloody, and stretching the boundaries between reality and dreams, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* re-ignited the horror genre and earned its distributors, New Line, a whopping twenty-six million dollars. Four sequels followed in the 1980s, and now horror directors had a new model to imitate. “Rubber reality,” a term coined by Craven himself, was suddenly in fashion.

Clive Barker’s *Hellraiser* followed in 1987 and it depicted another “alternate” reality, one from which leather clad self-mutilating “explorers” called Cenobites hailed. The Cenobites would appear on Earth, in our dimension, only when unlucky folks seeking new pleasures of the flesh could solve a small puzzle box called the Lament Configuration. This willful act of re-shaping the box thus opened the gateways to Hell. Armed with hooks and chains the Cenobites would then proceed to rip their victims apart, in acts of pain so egregious they would make their prey better experience pleasure. The 1988 sequel *Hellbound* spent more time in Hell, a vast maze, and introduced the god of that realm, Leviathan, Lord of the Labyrinth.

Another rubber reality franchise attempted to get off the ground but with mixed results. In 1986, Sean Cunningham (the man behind *Friday the 13th*) produced the first installment in a series titled *House*, about a haunted abode. This was a jolly, light-hearted film, packed to the gills with golden oldies on the soundtrack (an attempt to appeal to baby boomers). William Katt headlined as the owner of the offending haunted house. A Vietnam veteran, he had to conquer his psychological ghosts at the same time that he battled a real Vietnam War ghost: a fellow soldier played by Richard Moll. Various rooms of Katt’s house would open up into bizarre rubber reality jungle vistas from ‘Nam.

This mix worked adequately, but *House 2: The Second Story* gilded the lily by featuring an altogether wackier house where each room led to nonsensical new dimensions. Behind one door was an Aztec temple; behind another, a prehistoric landscape. With an accent on comedy and cute, cuddly creatures, this example of rubber reality failed to appeal to the horror hardcore. Craven had established rules in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and rubber reality, above all, requires rules, or terror gives way to whimsy and horror is replaced by fantasy.

A number of 1980s rubber reality films also attempted to unseat

Freddy as the reigning king of horror. Craven himself tried with 1989's *Shocker*, a film that introduced a mass murderer and Mr. Clean look-alike, Horace Pinker (Mitch Pileggi), who could traverse various channels on TV. In one memorable instance, Pinker and his prey ended up on the set of *Leave It to Beaver*, a sitcom reality.

By the end of the decade, the rubber reality trend had spread throughout the slasher franchises like wildfire. *Hello Mary Lou, Prom Night 2* (1987) added supernatural elements to its mix, as did the *Halloween* series. *The Revenge of Michael Myers* introduced a psychic link between The Shape and his niece, specifically. Jason also came back from the dead, resurrected by lightning so was now, officially, a supernatural monster.

Even more strangely, *Slumber Party Massacre 2* (1987) fashioned a rubber reality boogeyman out of an imaginary rock'n'roll star who killed unsuspecting victims with his guitar-drill. Like Freddy and the other overlords of rubber reality, this man of the dream world was given to delivering juicy and silly *bon mots* at the scenes of each kill.

Primarily, three factors differentiate the rubber reality horrors from their slasher predecessors. The first is that the killer undergoes a personality infusion. Jason and Michael were the strong silent types, but Pinhead and Freddy are loquacious and, as mentioned above, boast strong personalities and senses of humor. They would make threats and tell jokes rather than merely stabbing people.

Secondly, the knife-kills go the way of all flesh in rubber reality ventures and are replaced by more expensive, but also more fantasy-based special effects sequences. Freddy kills teens in manners that would make Jason green with envy. He turns quarry into human cockroaches or transforms himself into a giant, phallic worm, devouring helpless little girls.

Thirdly, rubber reality films posited the existence of those alternate, supernatural realms. A few examples: dream states (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* [1988], *Phantasm* [1988]), life on the "other side" of mirrors, in reflections (*Prince of Darkness*, *Poltergeist III* [1988], Hell itself (*Hellraiser*), movies come to life (*Demons* [1985], *Demons 2* [1987])), books come to life (*I, Madman* [1989]) and on one occasion, even wax figures existing in their own living realm (*Waxwork* [1988]).

Rubber reality horrors dominated the last half of the 1980s, but after 1984, only a total of three dozen or so were made, just about half of

the slasher output. The reason for fewer films of this stripe was that the rubber reality adjustment to the slasher paradigm, though inventive and ingenious, also happened to be expensive. A prime strength of the slasher formula was its cheapness. In creating alternate worlds, the rubber reality horrors didn't have the option of cutting spending. Audiences came to expect elaborate set pieces, not just machetes.

Changelings, Ghosts and Poltergeists: The Supernatural Pack

In every decade, cinema sees dominant trends and also blow-back or back trends. The slasher paradigm tyrannized the horror films of the 1980s, but a slew of talented filmmakers also sought to re-invigorate the form with the more traditional supernatural enterprises, tales of haunted houses, ghosts and demonic possessions.

What made the 1980s examples of this back-trend so dynamic was that these endeavors didn't generally just depict supernatural events and leave it at that. Instead, they generally worked on several levels of meaning, and explored deep, timely themes.

Peter Medak's *The Changeling*, a precise and elegant haunted house film, starred the imposing George C. Scott as a widower who moved into a home possessed by the spirit of a dead boy. Medak's movie made the cogent point that Scott's character, a composer, was able to communicate with the spirit because of the recent loss he had suffered. Beyond that, however, *The Changeling* described a crime in the past, a tragedy that arose from greed and avarice.

The beneficiary of this crime, it turned out, was a politician, a prominent Senator who had changed parties, an act which clearly reflected Ronald Reagan's status, having gone from Democrat to Republican. The film may have been asserting that should Reagan get into high office he would be a changeling too, asserting one policy but pursuing another.

John Carpenter contributed *The Fog* to this batch of films. It remains one of the director's finest works, a ghost story concerning the sins of the father revisited on the heads of the children. As scenic Antonio Bay readies to celebrate its centennial, a roiling, luminescent fog brings home the ghosts of lepers who were tricked out of their treasure (and indeed their very futures) by the town's founding elders.

The film staged elaborate special effects with the fog, and starred

Adrienne Barbeau as a radio d.j. stranded at an isolated lighthouse on the night of the attack. Jamie Lee Curtis and Janet Leigh headlined the cast too, and the clever script paid special heed to the language, rhythm and flow of folklore. *The Fog* proved nearly as big a hit for Carpenter as *Halloween* had been, grossing fifty million dollars for Avco-Embassy on a budget of just seven million.

Stanley Kubricks' *The Shining* may be the best known "ghost" movie of the 1980s since Jack Nicholson's bravura performance as a bad father, Jack Torrence, has become the stuff of legend. *The Shining* was based on a novel by Stephen King and no expense was spared to make the eighteen million dollar production appear absolutely lavish. Kubrick mastered the new Steadicam technology to depict long roaming scenes, navigating the dark inner space of the Overlook Hotel, where Torrence had taken the job as caretaker for the winter.

Some critics insisted Kubrick overused the Steadicam device and, in general, responded harshly to the film. *The Shining* was analyzed, probably over-analyzed and critics read everything they could into it, alternately labeling it a satire of American cartoon culture and an economic parable about the crash of the American dream.

Tobe Hooper's mega-hit *Poltergeist* premiered in the summer of 1982 amidst industry gossip crediting Spielberg with directing. The film told the story of a typical American family, the Freelings, bedeviled by playful then malevolent spirits. The source of the spirits' anger was a corrupt business decision to build new real estate over old graves and move the headstones. A roller coaster of impressive special effects and chills, *Poltergeist* opened on June 4, 1982, and grossed more than seventy million dollars against a budget of eleven million, thus assuring two sequels.

Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986) depicted the head of the beleaguered Freeling family, again played by Craig T. Nelson, facing personal demons as well as literal ones. Feeling incapable of protecting his family from the persistent ghosts, he sought solace in a bottle of tequila, only to spit up his rage and anger in a frightening "Vomit monster." A third entry in the series, Gary Sherman's *Poltergeist III* followed in 1988 and is considered the weakest entry.

Sidney J. Furie directed one of the decade's best supernatural horrors in 1983, *The Entity*, starring Barbara Hershey. In explicit terms, this allegedly true story found a blue collar single woman terrorized by a vicious ghost. Carla Moran was a woman with a history of abuse. Her father had treated her inappropriately, she had run away at age

fifteen, then fallen into an abusive relationship with a drunk and drug addict. Her bad luck repeated, however, when she came home from a long day at work (and night school) only to be brutally raped by an invisible spirit.

The Entity charted Carla's path from victimization and denial to a fighting stance. Even though the authorities didn't believe her incredible tale of spirit rape, Carla eventually found inner strength and the 1980s found one of its oddest supernatural entries.

Other ghost stories during the decade were hit-or-miss affairs, including the follow-ups to the 1979 hit *The Amityville Horror*. *Amityville 2: the Possession* (1982) linked adolescence and incestuous sexual urges with demonic possession; *Amityville 3-D's* (1983) only claim to fame was its three-dimensional special effects.

Ghost Story, based on the novel by Peter Straub and starring Fred Astaire and John Houseman, had all the early earmarks it was going to be a classic, but ended up a disappointment despite the presence of gorgeous Alice Krige as a spectral siren.

In the 1980s, ghosts were involved in politics (*The Changeling*), victimizers (*The Entity*), sexualized (*The Entity*, *Amityville 2: The Possession*) and expositors of dark, hidden secrets (*The Changeling*, *The Fog*, *Poltergeist*). Never before and perhaps never since in horror history had ghosts revealed so much about American life.

Wolves in Yuppie's Clothing: Of Werewolves, Things and Body Image

Transformation might very well have been the buzz word of the 1980s. In a variety of special effects-heavy films, the beautiful human body was twisted, elongated, abused and infected with disease. The era of the aerobic exercise fitness craze and the dawn of AIDS both, the 1980s highlighted several movies about a blood disease, lycanthropy. Man became wolf, woman became cat, teen became cicada and scientist broached non-existence.

Imaginative imagery sparked a journey into inner space and found the human body unbound in Ken Russell's energizing, dynamic, fast-paced *Altered States* (1980). The film starred a young William Hurt as a charismatic but lonely and alienated scientist named Jessup searching for the great "truths" about human life. In seeking them, Jessup succeeded only in de-stabilizing his own physiology.

After one experiment in an isolation tank, Jessup physically reverted

to the form of a proto-human, down to his jaw structure and the alignment of his teeth. Later, in a frightening scene demonstrating how he had “abused” his body with scientific experimentation and medicines (read: drugs), Jessup lost physical cohesion, his body reverting to the nothingness of the pre-Big Bang cosmic void. Only Jessup’s connection to his wife (Blair Brown) could ground him here, and so *Altered States* became a meditation on human love.

The Beast Within (1982), a film by Phillippe Mora, saw transformations of another variety. As a teen boy named Michael (Paul Clemon) reached puberty, his physiology underwent a drastic, horrific shift. A chemical imbalance twisted the boy into a genetically pre-programmed descendant of a cicada monster, his real biological father. The film’s climax saw the adolescent sitting upright in a hospital bed as his body pulsated and swelled. His parents (Bibi Besch and Ronny Cox) watched slack-jawed in fear, wondering and fearing what their son might become.



The edge of science, or the edge of sanity? Dr. Jessup (William

Hurt) finds his physical biology twisted and transformed during a special effects showcase from Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980).

The wolf man myth was reborn with classic rock tunes from the 1950s and 1960s (including "Bad Moon Rising" and "Blue Moon") in John Landis's spectacular *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), a movie that found an innocent abroad (David Naughton) infected with the werewolf curse after being bitten while backpacking across the misty moors of England. The victim of bad timing too, the lad began to transform at the first full moon, just as his relationship with a beautiful British nurse (Jenny Agutter) reached its pinnacle. Rick Baker executed the film's amazing physical special effects, including a full-scale on-screen transformation from man to beast that, while leaving nothing to the imagination, shocked and awed nonetheless.



Puberty's a bitch! Teenager Michael MacCleary (Paul Clemens) undergoes a strange change during *The Beast Within* (1981).

The same year, 1981, saw Joe Dante's *The Howling* reach theaters. Like *An American Werewolf in London* it featured state of the art special effects, this time from a young wunderkind named Rob Bottin. The story took traumatized TV news reporter Karen (Dee Wallace) to an idyllic wooded retreat for rest and recuperation. Unfortunately, the "Colony" was populated by werewolves trying to come to grips with their "beasts inside." The film, a parody of pop psychology and self-

help, ended on a deeply satirical down note as the bitten Karen transformed into a werewolf on a live television newscast. Predictably, none of the watchers out in TV land paid her much mind.

Paul Schrader's remake of *Cat People* (1982) tied the notion of transformation to sexual repression. Nastassia Kinski played Irene, a virgin who feared that in the course of sexual intercourse, she would transform into a giant black panther and kill her lover, thus forsaking her humanity. She had good reason to fear, for her kinky brother (Malcolm McDowell) was a murderer himself, and would have liked nothing better than to make love to his sister. The sultry film, alive with a New Orleans vibe, climaxed with bondage and domination, and Kinski gave up her reservations and made love to the film's male lead, John Heard.

John Carpenter's *The Thing* was another story about transformation, and this time the metaphor was unmistakably disease. An alien shape shifter on ice was thawed in an Antarctic outpost after hundreds of thousands of years trapped there, only to begin replacing each scientist, one at a time with exact look-alikes. Suspicion grew among the men stationed there as it was impossible to detect who was a man and who was a thing. The only sure method of detection? A blood test, forecasting the age of AIDS.

Budgeted at a modest ten million dollars, Carpenter's harrowing film, which featured show-stopping transformation effects, grossed only fourteen million dollars in the summer of the family-friendly *E.T.* (1982). Critics vilified the film and the director was even termed—on one over-the-top occasion—a pornographer of violence.



Hair in all the wrong places: David Naughton endures the ultimate in body transformation under a full moon, in John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* (1981).

Virtually all of David Cronenberg's films in the 1980s, from *Scanners* (1981) and *Videodrome* (1983) to *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1989), involved the frailty and pliability of the flesh. Experimental drugs turned humans into powerful psychics in *Scanners*; a TV signal grew brain tumors in *Videodrome*; a "new form of cancer" debilitated a scientist in *The Fly*, and a gynecologist invented baroque and painful-looking instrumentation to probe the mysterious depths of that alien

“other,” the human female, in *Dead Ringers*. Each film was graced with Cronenberg’s trademark intellectual curiosity and his offbeat pacing.

King of the World: Stephen King Adaptations

Horror novelist Stephen King, a frequent bestseller in the publishing industry, became a one-man brand name in the 1980s. In addition to Kubrick’s interpretation of *The Shining*, which Stephen King reportedly found disappointing, the decade witnessed many of the finest and most well-known directors adapting his exceedingly popular genre material.

The year 1983 was also the year of Stephen King. Lewis Teague, the mastermind behind 1980’s animal-attack flick *Alligator*, helmed an adaptation of *Cujo*, the King novel about a rabid dog. The film found a little boy named Tad (Danny Pintauro) disturbed by monsters in his closet because his Dad is consumed with business deals and his bored mother (Dee Wallace again), feeling less than useful after a move to the country, had engaged in an illicit affair with a local tennis pro (Christopher Stone).



He's going to scare you to death! Horror novelist Stephen King hawks *Maximum Overdrive* (1986), a poorly received film he

directed.

The physical manifestation of Tad's fear was that poor, unlucky St. Bernard, a pet and "real" monster who had contracted rabies from a bat's bite on the nose. Commendably blunt, the film eschews melodrama and focused on one harrowing dog attack after another, until the viewer is left exhausted and drained.

Still reeling from *The Thing*'s negative reception, Carpenter retreated into safe territory with 1983's *Christine*, King's tale of a 1958 Plymouth Fury that was born "bad to the bone." Slowly and surely, the car began to possess its new teen owner in the 1980s, played by *Dressed to Kill*'s Keith Gordon.



You can run, but you can't hide from *Christine* (1983), John Carpenter's adaptation of the popular Stephen King novel. (Actor unidentified.)

Shooting on *Christine* commenced on April 15, 1983 and the ten million dollar film took five weeks to complete. Production required the use of twenty-three 1958 Furies for various shots, special effects sequences and gags. Carpenter peppered the proceedings with his favorite rock'n'roll tunes from the late 1950s and early 1960s including "Keep A Knockin."

David Cronenberg tried his hand at a King adaptation with *The Dead*

Zone, also released in 1983. It was a more episodic and character-driven horror than either *Cujo* or *Christine*. The film's story found a kindly schoolteacher (Christopher Walken) awakening from a coma after five years only to find his life a shambles; that his intended had left him to marry another man.

Johnny Smith also found he had unexpectedly gained the power of psychometry, the ability to divine the future of any person whose flesh he came in contact with. Ultimately, this power alienated Johnny from the rest of the human race but came in handy when he divined the future of one Greg Stillson (Martin Sheen), a Southern populist hoping to be president. Johnny experienced a vision in which Stillson provoked a nuclear war, and came to realize that if there was one thing his gift (or was it a curse?) could do for the human race, it was prevent Stillson's ascension to the presidency.

Further King adaptations came in succeeding years. *Firestarter* was the action-packed chronicle of a girl named Charlie (Drew Barrymore) who was pyrokinetic. Because her powers were so dangerous, believed capable of rending the crust of the Earth, Charlie and her Dad had to flee from a covert government agency called "The Shop" (headed by George C. Scott). In the film's predictable but explosive ending, Charlie burned down the Shop's headquarters, pulling a "Carrie."

The low-budget *Children of the Corn* starred Peter Horton and Linda Hamilton as a couple on a road trip gone awry. Detoured to a creepy Nebraska corn town run by malevolent children, they challenged a monster in the corn fields, one who burrowed beneath the soil and was known as the one "who walks behind the rows." *Children of the Corn* bowed in 1984 and was the subject of some controversy because of its unsavory mixture of intense gore and young children.

In 1985, King added his own contribution to the werewolf cycle of the 1980s with *Silver Bullet*, which saw a deranged wolf man—reverend punishing the sins of his un-virtuous flock by moonlight. Corey Haim starred as a handicapped young man who knew the werewolf's secret and needed the help of an uncle, a pre-crazy Gary Busey, to expose him. The film was campy, but had some merit.

In 1986, King took the reins of a production team and got behind the camera himself for *Maximum Overdrive*, a self-proclaimed "moron" movie about a Southern truck stop under siege from machines suddenly come to malevolent life. Based on his short story "Trucks," *Maximum Overdrive* starred Emilio Estevez as the young hero, a short order cook, and featured hard-nosed, excessively gory scenes (to the

strains of AC/DC's music) of electric knives, lawnmowers and other devices impaling, goring and killing humans.

Although King had boasted in previews that he was going to scare audiences "to death" with in *Maximum Overdrive*, it proved to a bomb, and was especially unpopular with critics. Some even claimed it was the worst film ever made, which was hyperbole.

The last Stephen King adaptation of the decade was Mary Lambert's *Pet Sematary*. More personal and grounded in reality than of King's other initiatives, the film had originally been slated for George A. Romero's direction, but helmer Lambert did a more than professional job with stars Dale Midkiff, Denise Crosby and Fred Gwynne dramatizing a story of one man's obsession with death.

In *Pet Sematary*, a married man, a physician named Creed (Midkiff), found it impossible to accept the death of his young son, and thus unwisely buried the boy's corpse in an old Indian burial ground where the earth has gone "sour." The boy returned to life but was distinctly wrong ... twisted, perverted and murderous. Even in the face of this failure, Midkiff's father-figure refused to accept the inevitability of death and kept making the same blood mistake, this time with his recently murdered wife (Crosby).

Stephen King's writings were also the source material for three anthologies in the 1980s: George Romero's *Creepshow* (1982), Lewis Teague's *Cat's Eye* (1985) and *Creepshow 2* (1987).

Short Stories: The Anthology

The 1970s were the halcyon era of anthology horror films such as *The House That Dripped Blood* (1970), *Tales from the Crypt* (1972), *Asylum* (1972), *Vault of Horror* (1973) and *From Beyond the Grave* (1973). In the subsequent decade, the form emigrated (mostly) to the States.

Of the six significant horror anthologies crafted in the 1980s, half were based on Stephen King's literary material, as noted above. In 1982, George Romero contributed the five-part *Creepshow*, which adopted comic-book panel art for its scene transitions, and adhered to the EC Comic aesthetic, meaning that bad people were punished and that cosmic "just deserts" were meted out. The most memorable vignette was its last tale, which saw the austere apartment of a Howard Hughes-like bug-a-phobe, a nasty old recluse played by E.G. Marshall, overrun by hundreds of thousands of skittering, swarming

cockroaches.

Creepshow 2 followed in 1987 and learned from the missteps of its lethargically paced predecessor. It featured only three stories and ran for a fast ninety minutes instead of two hours. Though the first story was a simple vigilante tale featuring a general store wooden Indian come to life to avenge its murdered owner, the second story was a distinct improvement, involving a killer oil slick threatening teenagers on a raft in the middle of an idyllic lake. The last story, found a typical eighties yuppie (Lois Chiles) accidentally mow down a hitcher and flee the scene of the crime. She was then haunted by the increasingly decomposed corpse of her victim, who constantly croaked “Thanks for the ride, lady.”

Cat's Eye, directed by Lewis Teague, also featured three stories, though this go at adapting King material boasted a more family feel. Whereas the *Creepshow* films had employed a magazine ghoul called “The Creep” as the connecting tissue holding diverse stories together, *Cat's Eye* selected a friendly little feline named “The General” for that purpose. After evading Cujo (a nice in-joke), this cat began to experience disturbing visions of a little girl in danger (Drew Barrymore, again) and thus crossed the country in search of her. His odyssey took him from story to story, and the last tale found this resourceful cat locked in mortal combat with a malevolent bedroom troll bent on stealing Barrymore’s breath. For once in the horror cinema, a cat was the hero!

The most high-profile and eagerly anticipated horror anthology of the decade was probably the Steven Spielberg-produced adaptation of the famous black-and-white Rod Serling TV series, *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64). *Twilight Zone: The Movie* scored four major directors on its docket: John Landis, Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante, and *The Road Warrior's* (1982) George Miller.

Unfortunately a helicopter accident on the set of Landis’ short (a morality play about the evils of racism) claimed the life of actor Vic Morrow and two child extras. The ensuing publicity and criminal trial stole most of the audience’s good will towards the project. Though Landis was exonerated of all charges, when *Twilight Zone: The Movie* premiered in June 1983 it was hardly the hit many expected.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, but I don’t think they [the film’s producers] had the sensitivity of Rod Serling,” Helen Foley, Serling’s English teacher, told the Associated Press at the film’s premiere in Binghamton, New York. “[H]is episodes were based on

imagination.”¹⁶

Besides Landis’s original tale, *Twilight Zone* featured three adaptations of classic original series episodes including Spielberg’s saccharine “Kick the Can” starring Scatman Crothers; Joe Dante’s wacky “It’s a Good Life” with Kathleen Quinlan; and the best of the lot, the claustrophobic little terror chestnut, “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet,” which featured John Lithgow as an airplane passenger who detected a monstrous gremlin on the wing.

The wraparound segment in *Twilight Zone: The Movie* involved a hitchhiker on a lonely road (Dan Aykroyd) asking his driver, Albert Brooks, if he wanted to see something *really* scary.

Much scarier than *Twilight Zone: The Movie* was Joseph Sargent’s hardly seen but nonetheless punchy anthology of 1983, entitled *Nightmares*. Eschewing any wraparound narrative device at all, the film simply featured four macabre horror tales of immaculate simplicity. One involved a serial killer, another a malevolent video game, the third a pick-up truck driven by Satan himself, and the fourth was a family drama about a house overtaken by an oversized rat.

Without a doubt, the weirdest anthology of the 1980s came from Great Britain, 1981’s *The Monster Club*. It found a vampire played by Vincent Price inviting a horror writer (John Carradine) to visit the local monster club, a disco populated by monsters. After some groovy boogie on the dance floor, the men got down to swapping tales, and Price’s focused on monster genealogy and the generally sorry state of human-monster relations. After three campy tales that reinforced the theme of monsters as disenfranchised ethnic minority, the film concluded with Price nominating Carradine for membership in the monster fraternity. “Man,” the horror icon insisted, “is the greatest monster after all,” having waged war, ushered in the Holocaust, invented the atomic bomb, and so forth.

Although *Tales from The Darkside: The Movie* premiered in 1990, the 1980s was the last great decade of anthologies, a horror format now out of style.

Coming at You: The 3-D Revival

The 1980s boasted another interesting trend, a brief revival of the 3-D format first explored in the 1950s, a technique which made it seem to

audience members (decked out in unattractive cardboard glasses) that images on the screen were jumping out of them.

The trend was actually ignited outside the horror milieu with a surprise hit called *Coming At Ya!* a Western which shocked the industry when it grossed twelve million dollars during its summer 1981 release.

The first horror film to jump on the 3-D bandwagon was *Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D* (1982) which shattered expectations and outgrossed both previous franchise entries. In fact, the small film (budgeted at just over two million dollars) earned back a whopping forty million dollars. According to reporter Thomas Wiener in *American Film*, the third *Friday the 13th* film (and the first to feature Jason donning the soon-to-be-famous hockey mask) “proved the feasibility of placing a 3-D movie in wide national release,” and its distributor Paramount “laid the groundwork by advising them [theater owners] on ways to prepare their screens and install projection equipment.”¹⁷

topps



JAWS 3-D

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In the 1980s, there was a mini-boom of 3-D movies. This bubble gum card pack from *Jaws 3-D* (1983) even provides a "viewer" to

gaze at the trading cards in 3-D while you're snapping the gum.

Accordingly, the floodgates opened. The year 1982 saw the release of a second 3-D horror, a cheapjack post-apocalyptic movie called *Parasite*, starring Demi Moore. The titular character was an oversized worm with teeth who would burrow inside of people and eat them.

The next year, 1983, was the year of the 3-D film. A 3-D space adventure, *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone*, and a 3-D Indiana Jones-style picture called *Treasure of the Four Crowns* both bowed in auditoriums. In the horror genre, *Jaws 3-D*, the third installment of the saga about a great white shark munching unlucky swimmers, opened big at the box office but sunk precipitously on bad word of mouth. The film's revenue stream dropped by a whopping forty percent during its second week in release.

Jaws 3-D grossed approximately as much as *Friday the 13th Part 3*, over forty million dollars in fact, but the budget had soared to ten times *Friday*'s—over twenty million—meaning it was significantly less profitable.

The next 3-D film in line, also the third installment of a durable franchise, *Amityville 3-D*, opened in November of 1983 and also failed to impress audiences and critics. It grossed a meager six million dollars. 3-D clearly didn't prove an attraction since the 1979 original had grossed ninety million world-wide and *Amityville 2: The Possession* had managed a respectable haul of about twelve million.

As quickly as it began, the 3-D trend was over. At least until 1991 when *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* resurrected it for one last gasp.

Wet Work: The Sea Monster

Another trend of the 1980s saw horror hit the high seas. Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and its sequel *Jaws 2* (1978) had proven immensely popular in the disco decade, along with Joe Dante's tongue-in-cheek *Piranha* (1978), and so more horrors were set on (or beneath) the ocean.



Gimme a big hug! In *Amityville 3-D*, another third installment featuring 3-D, psychic researcher Elliot West (Robert Joy) gets an embrace from Pure Evil.

Piranha Part 2: The Spawning (1983) starred Lance Henriksen and featured work by a young director named James Cameron, who was reportedly fired from the film after a week. The low budget and rather crass sequel to the Dante hit dropped the welcome campy humor and instead went for gore. The film equipped its monster fish with leathery bat wings so they could leap from the surf and go right for the carotid artery.

Jaws 3-D, directed by Joe Alves, transplanted the horror of a great white shark to an amusement park, Sea World-like locale, to precious little effect. It starred Dennis Quaid, Bess Armstrong and an embarrassed-looking Louis Gossett, Jr. The film's ridiculous climax saw a grenade conveniently left behind in the great white's gaping mouth for a last-minute detonation, and the 3-D imagery was murky and unappealing. The shark was often depicted in unconvincing, rigid miniature form.



Dry, they ain't much. But wet? A watery action scene featuring McBride (Greg Evigan) and Collins (Nancy Everhard) from 1989's *Deep Star Six*, just one of several movies in the decade that concerned underwater sea monsters.

If anything, *Jaws: The Revenge* (1987) was worse. This time it was personal as a great white shark went all-out to vent its considerable wrath upon the poor, beleaguered Brody family, this time represented by grandmother Lorraine Gary. Directed by the talented Joseph Sargent (the man behind *Nightmares*), *The Revenge* proved inexplicably

and pervasively bad, and it featured—for perhaps the first time in movie history—a fish that roared like a lion.

As if trying to keep a low profile following such a debacle, the sea monsters transitioned underwater. While James Cameron hoped to evoke a sense of wonder with his science-fiction, first-contact odyssey *The Abyss* (1989), competitors who smelled a hit raced to beat his picture to the box office.

Roger Corman offered a low-budget undersea story that saw futuristic scientists (including Bradford Dillman) encountering aliens in *Lords of the Deep* (1989). Sean Cunningham went for the jugular with *Deep Star Six*, which depicted a large and very nasty arthropod worming its way into a deep sea mining facility so as to threaten Greg Evigan and Cindy Pickett. Finally, Peter Weller and Amanda Pays starred in George Cosmatos' *Leviathan*, essentially the same undersea monster movie as *Deep Star Six*, only with a bigger budget.

Alienated: The Space Monster

Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), a story of blue-collar space ship jockeys interacting with a hostile extra-terrestrial organism, sparked another eighties mini-trend, movies about space monsters.

First and foremost on this list was the amazing, elaborate and tense sequel to *Alien*, called *Aliens*. Directed with consummate skill by James Cameron, this riveting, elaborate and epic picture saw Sigourney Weaver (who garnered an Oscar nomination for the role) return as Warrant Officer Ellen Ripley. Once more, she battled with the murderous xenomorphs, here in all their various and sundry (and horrific) stages, from crab-like face-hugger to blunt-nosed chest-burster to full-grown, human-like drone. The fresh wrinkle this time around was a new alien: the colossal Alien Queen, mother of a hive society.

Reflecting the “new Patriotism” of the Reagan and post-Rambo age, *Aliens* pitted heavily armed, technologically superior Marine Corps members (or “grunts”) against the instinct-driven, resilient and acid-blooded alien beasts. Although *Aliens* was pumped up with macho dialogue, a martial soundtrack by James Horner, and impressive hardware, it also served as an undercover metaphor for America’s failure in the Vietnam War, with the Marines gravely underestimating an enemy they had mistaken as “primitives.”

Roger Corman's low-budget *Galaxy of Terror* (1981) seized not on *Alien*'s titular character, the razor-toothed monster from the void, but rather the strange organic production design of the derelict and space jockey on LV-426 (which featured a portal resembling a vast, dark vagina).

In this effort, a distant planet called Morganthus was the destination for a diverse rescue crew. The team, which included Robert Englund, Ernie Moran, Grace Zabriskie and Sid Haig, discovered a strange alien pyramid with chambers strangely resembling the interiors of organs and organ systems.

In a variation of *Forbidden Planet*'s (1956) ending, it was revealed that the crew's inner fears were being projected as murderous realities inside the pyramid. Only here, it was not a Krell brain boost to blame, but rather a shadowy figure called a "planet master" and a line of leadership succession.

Inseminoid, or *Horror Planet* (1982), exploited another aspect of *Alien*'s unique chemistry. In Scott's film, the biologically perfect aliens perverted and twisted the human reproductive system, making humans the carriers, or mothers, for alien young. The notorious chest-burster scene represented monstrous birth. *Horror Planet* found a comely space scientist played by Judy Geeson abducted and then impregnated by an alien whose world was dominated by the concept of "doubles." Thus she gave birth to two monstrous alien twins. To sustain herself during the pregnancy, Geeson's madwoman feasted on the entrails of her murdered comrades, and the film made a point about a woman's biology subverted to house the maternal instinct of an alien species. Another disturbing and slimy film that saw an alien birth was 1983's unusual *X-tro*.

The low-budget *Creature* (1985) sought to exploit and tweak *Alien*'s commercial, anti-business angle, positing a future where competing "companies" vied for space resources. The requisite interracial and sexually representative spaceship crew discovered an alien laboratory zoo, one where specimens from all over the galaxy were housed in stasis. One murderous specimen broke free and set about killing them, including the foreign corporate competitor, a role essayed by freaky Klaus Kinski.

Aliens not only inhabited the furthest reaches of outer space in the 1980s, they also visited Earth. Mostly they were in the mood for a little sport. Both *Without Warning* (1980) and *Predator* (1987) dramatized malevolent alien hunters arriving on Earth to kill humans

and take their corpses as trophies.

The alien in *Without Warning* utilized a little organic Frisbee as his preferred weapon; it would cling to unsuspecting humans and progressively rip their flesh. The Predator offered a more technological threat. He came to Earth equipped with a personal cloaking device and a shoulder-mounted laser cannon, not to mention a wicked self-destruct device. *Without Warning* pitted alien against Jack Palance and Martin Landau, and *Predator* an alien against Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Jack Sholder's *The Hidden* (1987) saw an alien come to Earth and "hide" inside human forms. He was detectable only by his egregious crimes and insatiable urge to take the things that he wanted. "I want that car," he declared before stealing a Porsche. In the film's most wicked moment, the alien consumer saw a Senator on TV and later declared, "I want to be President."

The weirdest alien movie of the 1980s may have been 1985's Fred Olen Ray low-budgeter, *Biohazard*, which found psychic ambassador Angelique Pettyjohn mentally summoning a half-pint alien to Earth for death and destruction. In one scene, the diminutive alien stomped on a poster for the Spielberg film, *E.T.*

The Zombie Stomp: The Living Dead Return

George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) also inspired an inordinate number of imitators in the 1980s. Many of these films came from Italy, including a few of the worst and most incoherent, including *Nightmare City* (1980), which featured zombies that could operate tools and guns, and *Night of the Zombies* (a.k.a. *Hell of the Living Dead*) (1984), a film which meticulously but boringly interwove original gory material with documentary stock footage of New Guinea.

Lucio Fulci's mostly incoherent efforts, *Gates of Hell* (1981) and *The Beyond* (1983) also featured zombies in peripheral roles, but the big news of the decade was that the master himself, George A. Romero, was directing what was to intended as the final film in his "Dead" trilogy, *Day of the Dead* (1985).

Set in an underground base near Miami some time after the zombie apocalypse, *Day of the Dead* found tensions running high between redneck military men and a group of scientists, including a nut-job, Dr. Logan, who believed that zombies could be domesticated. To that

end, he even trained one zombie, Bub (Howard Sherman), to behave civilly. Bub's touching and emotion story arc (which sees him learning how to use a gun) proved the film's undeniable high point. It was both a personal touch and also a turning point in the mythos, indicative of a sea change in zombie behavior. The monsters were getting smart.

Although a good film, *Day of the Dead* didn't live up to high expectations, especially after the twin triumphs of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn*, in part because Romero had been forced to scale back his original script to secure funding. This means that much of *Day of the Dead* (except a stirring and epic scene in Miami during the prologue) was set in a basement. And an unattractive basement to boot.

Ironically, it was not Romero, but rather director Dan O'Bannon who created the perfect 1980s zombie film to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Romero's seminal 1960s and 1970s efforts. *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) starred Clu Gulager, James Karen and Linnea Quigley as characters caught up in a toxic chemical spill that brought the angry dead back from their grave. Many of the youngsters in the film were punks with descriptive names like Suicide, Scum and Trash. They were already living in a "dead" culture, so that was a nicely ironic addition.

More significantly, O'Bannon injected a healthy dose of gallows humor and nihilism into the proceedings. In one scene, two characters who weren't aware they had actually died begin to suffer the gruesome effects and pains of rigor mortis. And, in the film's stunning finale, the government indiscriminately nuked the whole area: survivors and zombies alike. O'Bannon's zombie ate brains (a variation on the Romero template), and alarmingly proved fast-moving and agile.

A disappointing sequel, *Return of the Living Dead 2* (1987), also starring James Karen, reduced all this good, adult work to the juvenile level of a kid's comic book. Still, the sequel did feature one ghoulish and amusing touch. A Michael Jackson zombie (wearing *Thriller* gear) began to gyrate madly, as though break dancing and moon walking, when suddenly electrified.

Re-Animator, an H.P. Lovecraft short story directed by Stuart Gordon, was yet another 1980s zombie romp that featured fast-moving zombies. Worse, it wasn't just the dead corpus that were mobile in this film, it was each individual body part. Accordingly, severed heads could still command zombie troops and large intestines were spring-

loaded to strangle enemies.

Auteurs

The 1980s saw many of the 1970s' most prominent genre voices return for encores. John Carpenter, the master of the trance-like tracking shot and elaborate pan, zinging electronic score and Howard Hawks homage, experienced a particularly turbulent but busy decade. He opened with his 1980 ghost story and meditation on folklore, the unqualified hit, *The Fog*. He followed that up with the action fantasy *Escape from New York* (1981) and then directed the film for which he was vilified, the 1982 remake of *The Thing*.

Stung by the hostility of *The Thing*'s critical notices, Carpenter shunned the spotlight. After a period of retreat, he directed a "safe" Stephen King adaptation, *Christine*, before helming a more soft and cuddly alien contact film, *Starman* (1984). In 1986, Carpenter's big-budget kung-fu fantasy *Big Trouble in Little China* went belly up at the b.o., necessitating yet another change in plan: a beeline back for the open arms of horror. He directed *Prince of Darkness* (1987), an AIDS metaphor movie with Evil transmitted as a fluid from mouth to mouth, and the spiky, leftist call to arms, *They Live* (1988). The latter (starring wrestler Rowdy Roddy Piper) saw the poor and homeless strike back against alien yuppie Republicans keeping America "asleep" with subliminal images on the boob tube. The film culminated with a literal upturned finger to the establishment.

Carpenter is important primarily as a stylist, an artist who understands perfectly how to shoot and compose beautiful, affecting, and frightening scenes. His 1980s work reveals a complexity of themes (not necessarily evident in the groundbreaking *Halloween*) and a distinct penchant for films boasting an anti-authoritarian viewpoint.

MATCHBOX

Ages 8 and up

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

I'M FREDDY!
SEE BACK PANEL



TALKING
FREDDY
KRUEGER

A talking Freddy Krueger doll from Matchbox was just one piece from the late 1980s Freddy Krueger merchandise blitz.

Another maestro, Wes Craven started out the 1980s in less than stellar shape by making an obscure (but interesting) social horror about repressive religion and hypocrisy called *Deadly Blessing* (1981). Things went from bad to worse for Craven as he was reduced to directing a sequel to his 1977 hit, *The Hills Have Eyes Part 2* (1985). This failed film featured lengthy flashbacks (actually clips) of the action in the first picture. *Hills 2* time pitted *Friday the 13th*-style teenagers against Michael Berryman's savage man and a heretofore unseen brother named "Reaper."

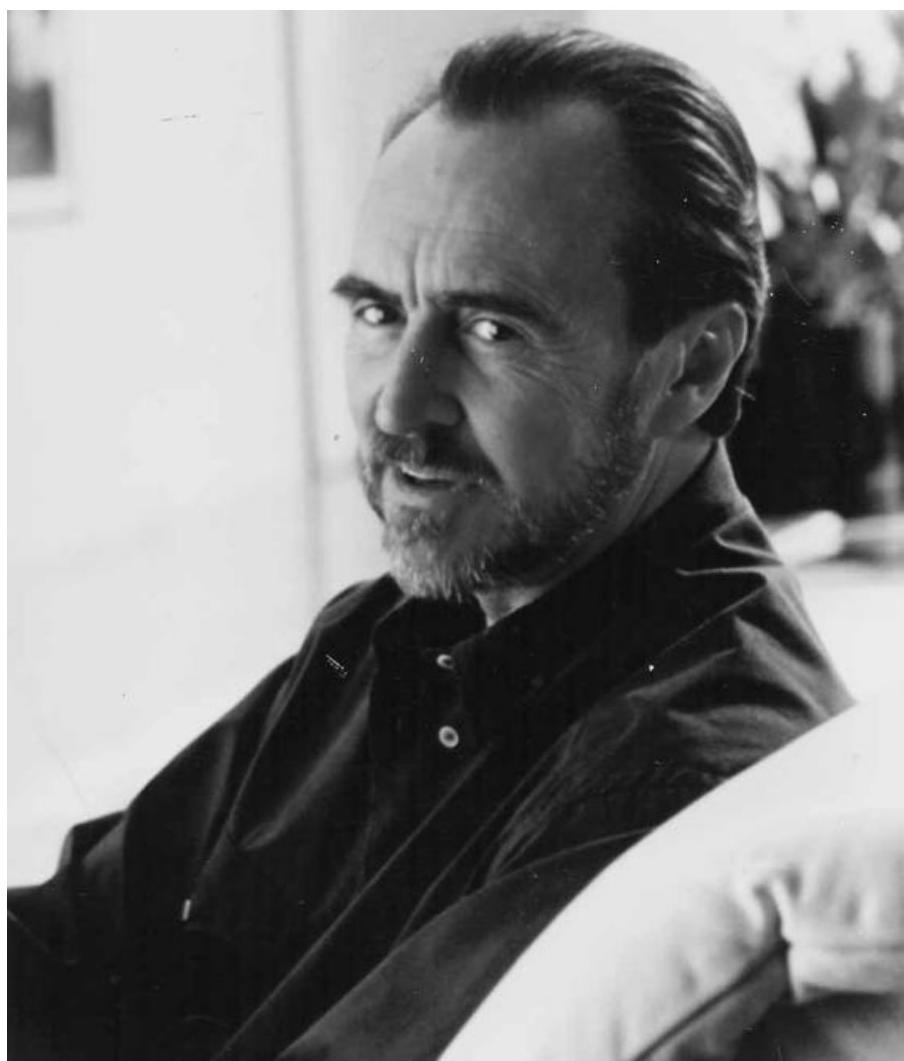


Adrienne Barbeau and director John Carpenter prep a shot on the set of *Escape from New York* (1981), their follow-up to the 1980 hit horror film, *The Fog* (1980).

In 1984, everything changed for Craven. He directed *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, perhaps the seminal 1980s horror flick, and the effort that introduced the world to Robert Englund's boogeyman, Freddy Krueger, as well as the precepts of rubber reality.

On the strength of that film, Craven ascended to big-budget horror films and directed the less-than-memorable "teen Frankenstein" story,

Deadly Friend (1986), his voodoo masterpiece, *The Serpent and The Rainbow* (1988), and his second attempt at a franchise, 1989's *Shocker*. In the 1990s, Craven would fumble once more with movies like *A Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), but recover his footing with the *Scream* (1996) saga.



He created Freddy: A portrait of rubber-reality maestro Wes Craven.

Craven is significant to the genre as its social worker and family counselor. His frequent subject is the disintegration of the family unit (which usually collapses from within), and in particular, "bad father figures." Themes involving alcoholism and domestic abuse are

common in his canon. He is also renowned for spotlighting strong female characters, such as Nancy in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Richard Franklin, the Australian Hitchcock apprentice who had burst onto the scene with 1978's psychic thriller *Patrick*, returned to helm three high-profile 1980s horrors. The first was *Road Games* (1982), a Hitchcock homage starring Jamie Lee Curtis and Stacy Keach. The film concerned Keach's truck driver (and pet dingo) attempting to ferret out the secrets behind a series of gruesome murders. Murders, incidentally, that he was being framed for.

In 1983, Franklin earned the assignment of a lifetime, directing Anthony Perkins in *Psycho II*, the long-awaited follow-up to Hitchcock's most infamous movie. Vera Miles returned from the original cast as well, and *Psycho II* also starred a young Meg Tilly as a possible romantic interest for the schizoid Norman Bates. Witty, surprising and ultra-violent, *Psycho II* ultimately earned the respect of critics who had been gunning for it. People assuming it would be a rip-off were surprised to see that Franklin had built a very different but very effective mouse trap.

Franklin's last film during the decade unfortunately was lost in a distribution shuffle. *Link* starred Terence Stamp and Elisabeth Shue and involved a pitched battle between ape and man, where all the established rules of conduct were thrown out. The film climaxed in an electrifying confrontation between the species.



Anthony Perkins and Hitchcock protégé Richard Franklin discuss

a set-up for *Psycho II* (1983).

"I'm a neo-classicist," Franklin revealed in an interview in the book, one who believes "traditional *mise en scène* can't be beaten." He also dislikes wobbly-cam because it "draws attention to itself and gets in the way of emotion."

Tobe Hooper, the auteur behind *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), also worked frequently throughout the 1980s. His first film, *The Funhouse* (1981), meditated on ghoulish entertainments and the ways that sometimes it's difficult to discern reality from illusion. His second film in the decade, *Poltergeist* (1982) remains Hooper's most celebrated and financially successful title, but it was mired in controversy when some reporters asserted that Spielberg had directed it.



Who's the boss? Steven Spielberg and Tobe Hooper, left, discuss the finer points of cemetery headstones on the set of *Poltergeist* (1982). James Karen and Craig T. Nelson take direction on the right.

Attempting to leave that disaster behind, Hooper directed the big-budget flop about space vampires called *Lifeforce* (1985). A highly charged tale of sexual appetites run amok (and featuring frequent full frontal nudity), the helter skelter, manic film culminated in a messy, chaotic zombie attack on London.

Hooper's next two films for Cannon also flopped: *Invaders from Mars* (1986) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre Part 2* (1986). Hooper ended the decade with a forgettable film called *Spontaneous Combustion* starring Brad Dourif. It had only limited distribution and didn't make much of a splash on video.

Still, Hooper remains one of a kind, a surrealist who prefers films that features at least two villains working in tandem and the duality of surfaces versus the deadly "underneath." Of all the eighties auteurs, it is Hooper who most deserves the descriptor of post-modern, because his work downplays the importance of conventional narrative (and movie decorum), instead advocating "no deal" ... meaning all expectations are off the table. This approach grants the Hooper film an important quality of unpredictability and danger.

David Cronenberg fared much better in the 1980s, and his career took him from Canadian "also ran" to the toast of Hollywood. He directed *Scanners*, *The Dead Zone*, *Videodrome*, the mega-hit *The Fly*, and finally *Dead Ringers*. These titles earned him a solid reputation among horror films and critics, and in the 21st century he's an A-list director.

As is noted elsewhere in this text, Cronenberg may be best described as horror's biologist or exploratory surgeon, the director who cuts open the flesh and peers inside to examine the innards. He's obsessed with body image, bio-mechanical fusion and the like.

Larry Cohen, the genre's foremost humorist, directed a number of offbeat films in the 1980s, each starring quirky method actor Michael Moriarity. *Q: The Winged Serpent* saw a giant monster nesting in New York's Chrysler Building and a small-time crook attempting to exploit it. *The Stuff* (1985) was an invasion story about a new dessert food turning unsuspecting diners into "Stuffies," conspicuous consumers who talked just like they were living in TV commercials. Finally, *It's Alive 3: Island of the Alive* ended the *It's Alive* cycle in less than satisfactory fashion, but again made a probing point about a 1980s America obsessed with *Entertainment Tonight*, lucrative book deals, and a media consumed with the suffering of others.

George Romero, whose films also reflect some important aspect of American culture, didn't quite have his mo-jo turned on in the 1980s. After a decade in which he went from strength to strength in entries like *The Crazies* (1973), *Martin* (1976) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), he directed the adequate but lightweight *Creepshow* (1982) and the disappointing *Day of the Dead* (1985). Only Romero's final film of the decade, 1988's *Monkey Shines*, revealed his active and searing intellect

at work. That film involved a paraplegic's (Jason Beghe) relationship with a small monkey named Ella and cogently discussed animal instinct.

Ken Russell doesn't consider himself a horror director, but he flirted with the genre repeatedly in the 1980s. All of his films feature dazzling, trippy and hallucinatory imagery as well as a formalist flair. *Altered States* (1980) was the horror equivalent of *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s (1968) ultimate trip, only charting inner space. *Crimes of Passion* (1984) was a sex farce featuring Anthony Perkins in another of his patented psycho roles, and *Gothic* (1986) was a weird and wild biopic revealing the origin of *Frankenstein*, but laced with strange visions and the powerful impression of a drug trip. *Lair of the White Worm* (1988) was Russell's most traditional horror flick of the decade.



Such a nice, polite young man. He wrote the book (of the dead) on horror in the 1980s: *Evil Dead* director Sam Raimi.

A potent new voice in the 1980s horror cinema came from young Sam Raimi, who in 1983 shocked the world with his energetic, bloody and innovative *tour de force*, *The Evil Dead*. He pioneered the use of the unsteady or “shaky” cam, a rocketing camera that always seemed to be in danger of striking the *dramatis personae*.

After filming an ill-fated screwball crime caper called *Crimewave* (1985), Raimi next directed *Evil Dead 2: Dead By Dawn* (1987), a restart of his popular “Deadite” saga that mythologized the lead character Ash (played by Bruce Campbell) into a monster-smashing icon. Raimi also added a sense of off-kilter, Three Stooges–style violent humor and pratfalls to his daffy sequel. Raimi remains important for his devilish sense of humor and his acrobatic, over-the-top camerawork.

Another up-and-comer, James Cameron, turned his *Piranha 2* failure into sweet success when his film about apocalypse, *The Terminator* (1984), became a sleeper hit. Cameron rocketed from that victory to the blockbuster *Aliens* (1986). Finally, he ended the 1980s with *The Abyss* (1989), a non-horror outing. In the 1990s, he would become King of the World after *Titanic* (1997).

Other directors saw their fortunes rise and fall in the 1980s. Thom Eberhardt made the forgettable *Sole Survivor* in 1983 but his luck changed with 1984’s cult smash, *Night of the Comet*.

Kevin Connor directed one of the great 1980s horrors, the black comedy *Motel Hell* (1980), but then felt less than satisfied with his unusual tale of an eternal doomed love triangle, *The House Where Evil Dwells* (1982).

Tom McLoughlin burst onto the scene with his re-invention of the Gothic aesthetic, *One Dark Night* (1983) starring Meg Tilly, and then directed one of the best later *Friday the 13th* films, *Jason Lives* (1986).

Old hand Joseph Sargent contributed the outstanding anthology *Nightmares* but then created one of the worst sequels of all time, *Jaws: The Revenge*.

Tom Holland also saw a meteoric rise, from writing the dreadful *The Beast Within* (1982) and the hit *Psycho II* to directing two of the decade’s finest horrors, *Fright Night* (1985) and *Child’s Play* (1988).

Eighties Controversies

The 1980s witnessed three prominent controversies and crises vex the horror genre and all involved Steven Spielberg.

The first involved the film *Poltergeist* and the matter of which artist, Steven Spielberg or Tobe Hooper, actually directed the film. The whole flare-up started, according to Hooper, when a reporter from *The*

Los Angeles Times arrived on location at Simi Valley as the first unit (helmed by Hooper) was filming a sequence (Oliver Robbins' encounter with a malevolent old tree) at the suburban Cuesta Verde location. The second unit (overseen by Spielberg) was simultaneously shooting pick-ups for the moment when mischievous children deploy remote-controlled cars to foul up a hurried football fan on a motorcycle.¹⁸



Lost at sea? Veteran director Joseph Sargent wrangles a mechanical shark during the making of *Jaws: The Revenge* (1987).

Allegedly, the reporter returned to the newsroom with a unique story: that it was uncertain who was directing this film enterprise. And so began the long-standing legend that directorial “ownership” of *Poltergeist* was in question.

Unfortunately, many statements and actions by Spielberg didn’t clarify the situation to Hooper’s advantage. When asked about working with child actors on horror films, for example, Spielberg seemed to indicate he was on equal footing with Hooper, even calling out direction:

Oliver ... became scared during the scene in which his big clown doll wraps its arms around him.... The arms became too tight and cut his wind off. I remember Oliver screaming, “I can’t breathe.” And Tobe Hooper and I thought it was great acting.... When I

asked him to scream, he screamed better than Janet Leigh in *Psycho*. So here Tobe is yelling, “More! More!” and I’m saying “great, Oliver, look toward the camera!” and suddenly I saw his face turn crimson....¹⁹

In another interview, Spielberg highlighted the importance of his participation, while simultaneously appearing reticent to discuss specifics that might appear “hurtful” to any unnamed parties:

All I can say about my involvement overall is ... I wrote the movie. I actually wrote *Poltergeist* but co-authored an earlier draft with Michael Grais and Mark Victor. I hired them to realize my original idea and ... did a complete rewrite.... And all I’ll say about my involvement as ... line producer with Frank Marshall is that I designed the film. From the storyboards to post-production ... I was the David Selznick of this movie ... I functioned in a very strong way.²⁰

This “who directed *Poltergeist*” issue got so out of hand that the Directors Guild of America intervened and launched an investigation to determine whether Hooper was “being demeaned by having his status as a director reduced to a mechanical rather than creative task.”²¹



Steven Spielberg, auteur of *Jaws* (1975), gave up horror for cuddly aliens in the 1980s. He also produced the NBC anthology *Amazing Stories*.

This investigation occurred when trailers for *Poltergeist* showed Spielberg “directing” on the set and advertised the picture as “A Steven Spielberg Film” while (in much smaller print) acknowledging Tobe Hooper as the actual director of the movie.

Forced to respond, Hooper insisted that he had done “fully half” of the film’s storyboards himself and totally directed the picture (a stance

echoed by many of the cast). He thus was at loggerheads with Spielberg, and the DGA sided with Hooper, fining Spielberg \$15,000²² and demanding that the offending trailers be pulled on both coasts.²³ The final judgment of arbiter Edward Mosk was that the trailers “denigrated the role of the director.”²⁴

Spielberg’s strange wording in an ad in *Variety* (another condition of the arbitration), congratulating Hooper on their unique and successful collaboration,²⁵ continued the controversy. At the same time he wrote Hooper had directed *Poltergeist* “wonderfully,” he thanked Hooper for allowing him “as producer and writer” a “wide berth of creative involvement.”²⁶

The second eighties controversy involved another Spielberg co-production, the anthology *Twilight Zone: The Movie*. In the early morning hours of July 22, 1982, as John Landis filmed an action scene for his opening segment in the film, tragedy struck.

The scene involved actor Vic Morrow and two young children (Myca Dinh and Renee Shin-Yi Chen) traversing a stretch of river while above them, perilously close, a helicopter buzzed. The fatal scene was lensed after two in the morning, when something went horribly wrong. Either the explosive charges were too large or the helicopter flew too low (perhaps, as was stated at his criminal trial, at Landis’s urging via bullhorn: “Lower! Lower! Lower!”). Whatever the cause, the helicopter crashed and decapitated Vic Morrow and killed the two children.

On August 3, 1982, the children’s families initiated a two hundred million dollar lawsuit that named both Steven Spielberg and John Landis as defendants. A criminal case was also brought, and on June 15, 1985, Landis was indicted by a grand jury. When the lengthy trial culminated on May 29, 1987, Landis was found not guilty of involuntary manslaughter, and the grim affair was finally over. The accident allegedly created a long-lasting rift between Spielberg and Landis. To this day, *Twilight Zone: The Movie* has not been released in the DVD format, a fact which has sparked much speculation (unsubstantiated) that Spielberg wants the film suppressed.

The third important controversy involving 1980s films involved the MPAA Ratings board and two Spielberg productions: the 1984 films *Gremlins* (directed by Joe Dante) and *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*. Spielberg has gone on record asserting that he doesn’t make R movies. However, in all likelihood, given the ratings system of the day, the violence in *Indiana Jones* (including a scene with a heart

ripped out of a character's chest) and *Gremlins* (which featured a death by microwave), both would have merited an R rating.

According to legend, Spielberg allegedly "suggested" to MPAA president Jack Valenti a new rating category that would still get thirteen-year-olds into the theater to see his films. Thus, on July 1, 1984, the PG-13 rating was created, apparently in an effort to accommodate the widely loved director and his commercial interests.

Among the first PG-13 horrors: *Dreamscape* (1984).

Finally, it's important to note another interesting fact about the history of 1980s horror movies. The burgeoning home video market spawned by the invention and mass-production of the VCR resulted, by decade's end, in a raft of direct-to-video features. In other words, these were horrors (usually cheapjack sequels) that bypassed the traditional theatrical system and went right to the shelves of video rental stores like Blockbuster.

Although the advent of video meant that horror collectors for the first time could maintain an archive of their favorite films, the format had drawbacks. Most films when converted to VHS featured something called "pan and scan," meaning that the widescreen aspects of the production (and thus the vision of the director) were compromised. Composition was changed, and thus, in many cases, the mise-en-scene and meaning behind particular choices. An easy way to understand this is simply that the movie screen is a rectangle, the TV screen a square, and in going from one to the other, fully one-third of the rectangle is lost.

Another side effect of home video's popularity was that many young filmmakers working in the industry began to direct for the format. Horror movies soon resembled TV series in their uninspiring chemistry of master shot, two-shot and over-the-shoulder shot. Generally, close-ups were overused as well. For a full understanding of this phenomena, one need only study an early 1980s film such as *Friday the 13th Part II* (1982) and compare it with fare like *Cameron's Closet* (1989). The 1980s is the decade that bears this unfortunate shift from cinematic thinking, to TV style. Somewhere in that transition, a great deal of cinematic history and artistry was sacrificed.



Chucky tries a Vulcan mind-meld on little Andy (Alex Vincent) in Tom Holland's *Child's Play* (1988).

III

The Films (by Year of Release)

More than 325 films are surveyed in the following section of *Horror Films of the 1980s*. Unlike the Internet Movie Database, however, the films are dated by the time of their American *release*, not to the production/copyright year.

1980

January 26: After years of hostility, Egypt and Israel establish diplomatic ties.

March 21: President Jimmy Carter announces the United States will boycott the Summer Olympic games being held in Moscow.

April 24: Eight American military men die during a botched attempt to free the hostages in Tehran.

May: The six-sided puzzle-toy invented by Budapest's Erno Rubik, known as a Rubik's Cube, is sold in the United States for the first time and becomes a pop-culture sensation for many kids. Before long, other puzzle toys follow Rubik's Cube onto the market, including Whip-It, Pyraminx, and Rubik's Snake.

May 18: Mount St. Helens erupts in Washington State. Though the death toll is relatively low (approximately 60), the cost to the region is in the billions.

November 4: Conservative Republican Ronald Reagan wins the 1980 presidential election, beating incumbent Jimmy Carter. The score in the Electoral College reveals a rout: 489–49. In the popular vote, Reagan beats Carter by over eight million votes. On the same day, Democrats also lose control of the Senate for the first time since the 1940s.

November 21: Over forty million TV viewers tune into CBS to learn who shot Larry Hagman's incorrigible anti-hero, J.R. Ewing, on the popular

Friday night soap opera, Dallas.

December 8: Mark David Chapman murders former Beatle and pop-icon John Lennon, shooting him four times. A nation mourns.

Alligator

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“The film is both believably scary and intelligently funny. [The filmmakers] wisely concentrate on the threat of the creature rather than shots of their model. The suspense is well-handled and the witty dialogue ... mirrors the disbelief of the audience.”—Darrell Moore, *The Best, Worst and Most Unusual: Horror Films*, Publications International, Ltd., 1983, page 60.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Forster (Detective David Madison); Robin Riker (Dr. Marissa Kendall); Michael Gazzo (Chief Clark); Dean Jagger (Slade); Sidney Lassick (Luke); Jack Carter (Mayor); Perry Lang (Officer Kelly); Henry Silva (Colonel Brock); Bart Braverman (Reporter); John Lisbon Wood (Mad Bomber); James Ingersoll (Arthur Helms); Robert Doyle (Bill Kendall); Patti Jerome (Mrs. Kendall); Angel Tompkins (Newswoman); Royce D. Applegate (Callan).

CREW: Alligator Inc. and Group 1 International Distribution Organization Ltd. Present a Lewis Teague film. *Casting:* Geno Havens, Lori Rabin. *Music:* Craig Hundley. *Film Editors:* Larry Bock, Ronald Medico. *Art Director:* Michael Erler. *Director of Photography:* Joseph Mangine. *Associate Producer:* Tom Jacobson. *Executive Producer:* Robert S. Bremsen. *Producer:* Brandon Chase. *Written by:* John Sayles. *Story by:* John Sayles, Frank Ray Perilli. *Directed by:* Lewis Teague. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

P.O.V.

“Have you ever read it [the script]? You should see how lousy that script was! It was really, really bad. Lewis turned it into something kind of fun and charming. That’s my memory of it. If you could find that original script, you could see how much better the movie is than the original script...”—Peter Smokler, *Alligator*’s second unit director, remembers the film’s first draft.

“The reason I said ‘Yes’ to *Alligator* is that I always found the myth that there are alligators in the sewers of New York amusing. So I wanted to make an amusing film. I tried to create a few scary moments, but it was primarily intended to be amusing...”—Lewis Teague, *Alligator*’s director, contemplates the film’s approach.

SYNOPSIS: A metropolitan police detective, David Madison (Forster), investigates a case involving two dismembered human corpses found in the sewers. He explores the sewers with a fellow cop, Kelly (Lang), but Kelly is attacked and eaten by a giant alligator. The beautiful Dr. Marissa Kendall (Riker) does not believe an alligator could be as large as Madison reports—36 feet—but a reporter snaps photos of the beast before he is killed, verifying Madison’s unusual story.

While a chemical company tries to keep its role in the alligator’s abnormal growth a carefully guarded secret, the police attempt to flush the animal out of the sewers. The operation fails and the alligator breaks out through a manhole onto the city streets, devouring another cop. The mayor (Carter) brings in a cocky big game hunter, Colonel Brock (Silva), to destroy the menace, but too he ends up as alligator food.

After Madison is dismissed from the force for learning too much about the illicit conspiracy involving the chemical company and the mayor, he raids the evidence room for dynamite and a time bomb detonator, still hoping to destroy the alligator. When the alligator crashes a fancy garden wedding (and eats the corrupt mayor), Madison and Kendall—who have become lovers—have their chance to destroy the giant beast.

COMMENTARY: The 1970s indisputably represented the halcyon decade of “when animals attack” or “revenge of nature” horror movies. *Night of the Lepus* (1972) featured a rampage by giant killer bunnies, *Frogs* (1972) saw Ray Milland besieged by the little green fellas, and in 1977, spiders rained down on William Shatner and Tiffany Bolling in the tense *Kingdom of the Spiders*. Oversized ants menaced (and ultimately brainwashed) eighties icon Joan Collins in *Empire of the Ants* (1976), and giant rats gnawed on Marjoe Gortner in *The Food of the Gods*. Ah, what a decade!

So when Lewis Teague’s *Alligator*, a movie concerning an oversized alligator terrorizing New York’s sewers, arrived in movie theaters in 1980, it felt like a cheesy holdover from the good old days of the disco decade ... and that’s a good thing. Belittled by some as a cheap knock-off of *Jaws* (1975) or even *Piranha* (1978), *Alligator* is actually a sturdy

little horror flick, in part because writer John Sayles, not unlike Larry Cohen, knows how to write a good, low-budget flick with attitude. Also, Teague is a skilled, tasteful director. He would continue to vet outstanding work throughout the decade, particularly *Cujo* (1983).

It would be easy to knock *Alligator* for its none-too-subtle (and completely intentional, according to Teague) similarities to *Jaws*. Like 1976's William Girdler epic *Grizzly*, there's a nearly identical character troika here, with a cop (Robert Forster), a hunter (Henry Silva) and a scientist (Robin Riker) working to stop a rampaging animal in a territory where it isn't expected to be hunting. There's even the typical wrong-headed mayor, an echo of *Jaws'* Murray Hamilton, here played by Jack Carter, whose incompetence allows the reign of terror to continue longer than it should.

Yet *Alligator* swims above its derivative origin not merely because it features a droll tone, and a script with a real tongue-in-cheek vibe, but because the *dramatis personae* speak throughout the effort as though they are actually distinct, real individuals, not the instrument of the plot or the mouthpiece of the writer.

The film's central character, Detective David Madison is a perfect example. Played by the inimitable Robert Forster, a versatile actor who can do anything—and yet who rarely gets the sort of parts he deserves—this character is laconic, witty, and displays just the amount of skepticism you'd expect from a hard-boiled cop in search of a perp that's reptilian. Forster grabs control of a part that, in the hands of another, more conventional sort, would no doubt be a boring or stolid “leading man”–type. Forster imbues the character with intelligence, integrity and even a degree of quirkiness.



Care for a little appetizer? An oversized reptile crashes the party in Lewis Teague's rip-roaring *Alligator* (1980).

Watching him engage the material is fun because Forster understands that even if the script's tongue is planted firmly in cheek, he must take the story on its own terms, with believability and grace. He's *Alligator*'s most valuable player.

The horror elements in *Alligator* are precisely what one would expect from an early 1980s-era animal attack film. There are plenty of alligator point-of-view shots (the preferred style of the 1980s) as it roams the sewers. There's the delightful (and anticipated) carnage as the alligator strikes a fancy outdoor wedding on the grounds of a lush estate. There's an evil company behind the beast (experimenting with growth hormones), the requisite failed attempt by the military (or S.W.A.T. in this case) to flush the creature out of the sewers (which brings to mind the climax of *Them!* [1954]), and, yes, the obligatory hook for a sequel (eventually produced in the 1990s) with a baby alligator waiting in the wings. Or rather, in the case, the sewers. Term this ending "The sting in the tale/tail" but whatever you call it, it's genre *pro forma*.

Despite such common elements, it's that witty attitude (with a capital

“A”) so prevalent in *Alligator* that ultimately makes the film a pleasure to view. From the film’s central conceit—an urban legend about baby alligators “flushed” into the sewers by pet owners, returning all grown-up—to the craftily staged action scenes, which include the giant alligator interrupting a game of stickball, this movie features a great sense of humor and a high fun quotient.

CLOSE-UP: Of Alligators and Men: Director Lewis Teague still recalls how he became involved with his 1980 film. “My agent called me and told me that Brandon Chase had a script called *Alligator*. Brandon had a company called Group One Production, and he sent me the script. I loved the idea, but I didn’t like the script, and expressed my interest if I could do a rewrite.”

“I just remember reading the script and saying ‘This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen!’” adds Peter Smokler [*This is Spinal Tap* [1984]) who was the second-unit director of photography on the picture. “This was just somebody trying to get the money to write a lousy horror film....”

“I’d just finished doing *Lady in Red*, based on a John Sayles script, and I called up John and asked if he would be interested in doing a rewrite,” Teague continues. “He was interested and agreed to do it, so we made a deal on that basis. John Sayles did a complete page one rewrite. I gave John just some rough outlines of what I wanted in the story.”

And what was Teague looking for, specifically?

“A story of redemption,” he notes. “Of a man who has a hidden secret in his past that he’s ashamed of, and then the alligator would be a metaphor for his personal demons to conquer. That’s what I’ve always loved about science fiction and fantasy, the opportunity to deal with metaphors.”

Despite a vastly improved script by Sayles, *Alligator* still had its share of difficulties to overcome when pre-production commenced. One of those involved bringing the titular creature to life.

“Brandon Chase, the producer, had gone ahead and built a full-scale model of the alligator—twenty feet long—before we raised the money to do the movie,” Teague describes. “He built the model as a sales tool, and by the time we actually got around to making the movie, the model—which was fabricated out of rubber and Styrofoam stretched over a rattan framework—had begun to disintegrate.

“So we went out and hired a special effects company to rebuild the

same mold, a more substantial full-scale model of the alligator. It was designed to be basically an alligator suit that would be carried and propelled by two men inside, with their legs in the alligator's legs' position.

"By the time the special effects guy got finished making the model," elaborates the director, "he was so concerned about it being strong and durable that he over-engineered it. It was so heavy that two NFL football players inside could barely lift the damn thing.

"When it was completed, we made a test out in the valley where the special effects company was located. We set up a couple of cameras and got two guys inside the huge alligator, zipped 'em up, and we had rehearsed how they were going to walk. But when they actually shot the test, a huge crowd had gathered and was curious about what we were doing. "When the two guys started walking inside, the crowd began to laugh. Why? Because in reality, an alligator moving close to the ground is able to stretch out his legs and take very long strides. But two men in an alligator suit taking long strides created the effect of an alligator taking mincing little, short steps," Teague explains. "Everybody started laughing, and I realized at this point that the movie would definitely have to be a comedy.

"Today it would be a different story," Teague continues, "because we'd be able to do CGI alligators. But I think, in a lot of ways, films were more effective before computer generated imagery because if you saw something happen on screen, you believed it had actually happened. Today you have the most phenomenal effects, but you know they were CGI."

Alligator cost a bit under half a million dollars to produce, and the exceedingly low budget made for further unique difficulties. Live alligators were used for some sequences, and as Teague notes, "Alligators don't take direction very well..."

"There are a few shots in the movie where we used baby alligators on miniature sets, but for the most part, things were done through suggestion and animatronics.

"[The special effects were] time-con suming. We had a full-sized alligator head that was mounted on a rickshaw kind of contraption, so I could have the head enter the shot. Or I could dolly with the head as it moved through the crowd and snapped people. We also had a disembodied tail that we could flap around and push the car with, and that sort of thing. I had a lot of second unit shots, so I was able to

delegate a lot of that kind of scene.”

“Alligators slithering, alligator mouth lunges … if the first unit needed two camera coverage, they’d bring us in,” says Smokler, who headed that second unit. “There were a couple of different alligators. They gave us a head for some lunges, and it was just a big foam rubber thing, but you could open the mouth and make it twist and turn. There were no motors in it.

“They actually fired our unit at one point. It was a really low-budget film, and we had a really bad generator. We went down into the storm drains after the first unit, and had to mark off where the lights were going to be. They had taken Polaroids, and we had to put the lights back up in the exact same spot. But [once the cameras were set up] there was no light coming out. The gaffer just said, ‘I’m not getting any light,’ and I said, ‘It was working before.’ And he said, ‘There’s something wrong with the power....’

“Apparently this was the kind of generator where as you turn on more lights, the voltage decreases. There’s a knob you had to turn, and the gaffer didn’t really know about that, and he criticized me and started snapping off all the lights. And that made the voltage run *really* high—five, ten times what it should have been. And that caused all the rental lights to explode.

“We were down in this storm drain under Venice Boulevard,” Smokler laughs, “and the lights blew up, and glass was flying everywhere. I don’t remember it that well, but I think that’s when they let the whole unit go. They called me back to do pick-up shots and stuff, but without a whole unit.”

But if making *Alligator* was daunting (and sometimes funny), Teague was in for another challenge when it came time to distribute the picture.

“The producer made no effort to have it reviewed because he had made a huge sale to television,” Teague explains. “So he didn’t really pay much attention to the theatrical marketing and I was concerned, of course, as the director, that it get reviewed. So I went to New York and set up a screening for the reviewer there, and Vincent Canby came and he reviewed it.

“The review came out on Wednesday, and it was a terrific review. And then he followed that up with an article about it in the Arts & Leisure section on Sunday. It got great reviews all over. I was surprised. I

thought it was fun and we did a good job, but I never expected it to be as universally liked as it was.”

“There’s a weird, funny sense to it,” Smokler adds, describing a reason for the film’s popularity.

“It’s mind-boggling,” Teague jokes. “Vincent Canby died about five years ago, and I got a call from somebody that he had requested at his funeral memorial that they screen clips of his favorite films. And one of the clips was from *Alligator*. I was so moved by that....”

LEGACY: A sequel to *Alligator*, called *Alligator 2: The Mutation*, appeared on video shelves in 1991, starring Dee Wallace Stone and Joseph Bologna.

Altered States



Critical Reception

“*Altered States* is like most other Ken Russell films, a challenge to watch and understand; but like the others, it is full of surprises and cinematic tricks and well worth the time spent viewing it.”—Martin A. Jackson, *USA Today*, May 1981, page 65.

“This is a Ken Russell film with his characteristic dazzling special effects shocks and zany beauty.”—Richard A. Blake, *America*, January 31, 1981, page 84.

“Despite all the emotion generated, Chayefsky’s interesting premise shrinks to incredibility and, as in too many recent films, form replaces thought.”—*The Christian Century*, April 22–29, 1981.

“...as trashily enjoyable and well-made as the movie is, it never takes you into its confidence emotionally. You feel shut out, as though you were watching everything through a window. And, in narrative terms, it’s a beautifully calculated piece of cheat.”—Lawrence O’Toole, “Splish-splashing a route to the ultimate truth,” *Maclean’s*, January 26, 1981, page 50.

“Oh, I know this movie is pretentious as all get-out—the finale could well be seen as a parody of *2001: A Space Odyssey*’s if it wasn’t offered with such solemnity. But I love the devotion of the Hurt character—and of Hurt’s performance—to exploring, down to a fundamental

level, what it means to be human. The flick is a mess, but it's a fascinating one, and deserves kudos for being so damn ambitious and so given over to hard questions few movies will go near.”—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher*, (www.flickfilosopher.com)

“Here is a horror film that dares to take itself seriously, charting one man’s search for ‘life’s great truths’ via modern science, consciousness-expanding drugs (there are shades of Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*), Western theology (Sir James George Frazier’s *The Golden Bough*), Eastern philosophy (The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad) and pop psychology (mostly Jungian). It’s a werewolf movie for the *2001: A Space Odyssey* audience, and arguably the most ambitious film of the decade.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland, 2004.

“Any movie that lets William Hurt munch some magic mushrooms is okay in my book. Considering the movie came out at the same time Reagan was unleashed on the world, I think most of us were in some kind of altered state or another.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: William Hurt (Dr. Edward Jessup); Blair Brown (Emily Jessup); Bob Balaban (Arthur Rosenberg); Charles Haid (Mason Parrish); Thaao Penghlis (Ecchevaria); Miguel Godreau (Primal Man); Dori Brenner (Sylvia Rosenberg); Peter Brandon (Hobart); Charles White Eagle (The Brujo); Drew Barrymore (Margaret Jessup); Megan Jeffers (Grace Jessup); John Larroquette (X-Ray Technician).

CREW: Warner Bros. Presents a Ken Russell film. *Music:* John Corigliano. *Special Visual Effects:* Bran Ferren. *Costume Designer:* Ruth Myers. *Associate Producer:* Stuart Baird. *Film Editor:* Eric Jenkins. *Production Designer:* Richard McDonald. *Director of Photography:* Jordan Cronenweth. *Executive Producer:* Daniel Melnick. *Written for the screen by:* Sidney Aaron. *From the novel Altered States by:* Paddy Chayefsky. *Produced by:* Howard Gottfried. *Special Makeup:* Dick Smith. *Special makeup assistants:* Carl Fullerton, Craig Reardon. *Casting:* Howard Feuer, Jeremy Ritzer. *Special Effects:* Chuck Gaspar. *Special Optical Effects:* Robbie Blalack, Jamie Shourt. *Macro Photography:* Oxford Scientific Films Ltd. *Optical Effects:* Cinema Research Corp., The Optical House. *Time Lapse Photography:* Lou Schwartzberg. *Special Laser Effects:* Laser Medic. *Directed by:* Ken Russell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You’d sell your soul to find the great truth. Well, human life doesn’t have great truths. We’re born in doubt, we spend our lives persuading ourselves we’re alive, and once we do that, we love each other like I love you.”—Emily’s (Blair Brown’s) marriage proposal to Dr. Edward Jessup (William Hurt) in Ken Russell’s *Altered States*.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Edward Jessup (Hurt) utilizes an isolation tank in the basement of a top university to answer his many questions about existence, consciousness and the nature of God. When floating alone in the tank, separated from the competing stimuli of life, Jessup hallucinates himself into other worlds, other times ... a stew of mad religious imagery and evolutionary visions. Though his soon-to-be wife Emily (Brown) is concerned with Jessup’s unusual studies, he obsessively continues them over the span of several years—forcing their eventual separation, even after the birth of their child (Barrymore).

Jessup proposes the theory that God (or the “true self”) exists inside memory, in the limbic system. He hopes that a combination of hallucinogenic drugs and isolation tank experiences will help him reach that threshold, the true self. When he conducts the experiment under the watchful eyes of two colleagues, Arthur (Balaban) and Mason (Haid), he only succeeds in physically corrupting his own fragile physicality. At times, Jessup spontaneously devolves into a primitive proto-man. On one of these occasions, he breaks from the isolation tank and runs amok on the streets.

At other times, Jessup’s physical form seems to devolve all the way back to his own birth ... to his beginnings in a vortex of non-existence. Ultimately, it is only Jessup’s connection to Emily—her love for him—that can ground Jessup in the present, in his physical body. However, even that link is endangered by his continuing experiments.

COMMENTARY: The doors of perception and evolution are thrown open in Ken Russell’s virtuoso, mind-altering *Altered States*, an imagery-laden special effects–driven movie revolving around several drug-induced mind trips ... of both the good and bad variety. The film, perhaps Russell’s masterpiece, seeks answers about the origin and nature of man, and in the end finds some solace in the fact that our knowledge knows limits.

Beyond man, the film visually informs us, resides a vast cosmic nothingness, a pre-existence without shape, form or consciousness. So what’s truly important in the limited human realm is not the discovery

of the beyond but what's here and now, before our very eyes: the love humans share for each other.

Like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Altered States* may qualify as the ultimate (cinematic) trip. However, in at least one significant way, Russell's film differs from Kubrick's. In *2001*, there was no central character, no hero to follow on a coherent narrative, and the HAL 9000 was certainly the most memorable personality. *Altered States* posits a more conventional protagonist, well-played by William Hurt, a unique and individual explorer. Jessup's a self-obsessed and passionate man who relentlessly seeks answers for a dark, personal reason (stemming from the death of his father), yet is blind to the people around him as well as their emotional states. He lives in an isolation tank of his own making before he ever sets foot in the first real isolation tank.



In an isolation tank, Dr. Jessup (William Hurt) seeks answers to life's big questions. From Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980).

So consumed with his own troublesome visions, his own burning desire to know the end—the secrets of life beyond death—Jessup turns away from the family that loves him and goes off on a fool's quest, in search of answers that can't be found. The altered states of the film's title are all focused squarely on Jessup himself. Whether he is experiencing trippy Christian imagery in one vision, using mushrooms to enhance his perception on a trip to Central America, or even reverting his physical form to proto-human physiology, Jessup's trials and tribulations remain tightly focused on unlocking what he sees as the true God: *himself*; his consciousness and the secrets locked within. Consequently, Jessup is cruel and dismissive of his wife, Emily (played by the beautiful and disarming Blair Brown).

Jessup changes his ways only when he has achieved his goal, but doesn't like what he's found. His repeated, biology-smashing visits to the mental prehistoric landscape stored inside his mind fly dangerously out of control, and Jessup travels back further and further in time, back to the Big Bang and perhaps beyond. His very body loses molecular cohesion and re-shapes itself. It is in these traumatic instants as his very atoms risk the obscenity and unacceptability of non-existence that Jessup realizes he risks losing that fragile, ineffable gift called consciousness, self-awareness.

Only Emily's faith in Jessup, her love for him, can keep him anchored in this reality, keep him tethered to his own physiology, and so *Altered States* understands that immortality comes not from an understanding of the divine or the cosmic, but by living a life well, with loved ones who will remember you when you cease to be. Scientific achievements, the knocking down of barriers, do not a happy human existence make.

In *Altered States*, Russell's visuals prove never less than entralling or stellar, but the film moves so nimbly because he directs his capable, talented actors to speak in breathless, overlapping dialogue of brilliant, tantalizing content. In tones indicating wonder and at highly accelerated speed, these men and women pontificate, speculate, explain and discuss the very meaning and nature of human life in rat-a-tat, staccato fashion.

Consequently, this smart movie plays like *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) on speed as audiences share the fascinating company of people aroused by the possibilities and potential "to know" the unknowable. Much of the film's breakneck pace arises not from the set pieces, but from actors who are engaged with the material on a heretofore unplumbed level.

Yet—and this is the reason why *Altered States* is so strong—Russell can nimbly switch between dialogue-heavy group scenes (which must have taken rigorous rehearsal to capture on film), to scenes of pure visual imagery, ones unfettered by explanation. For instance, it's quite remarkable that the dialogue scenes can exist side by side with the sequence involving a devolved Jessup as a “quasi-simian” and not seem like they’re a stretch or piped in from another film.

In the simian scene, Jessup reverts to primitive form via “genetic regression,” breaks out of the isolation tank, and runs amok on a dark city street. These moments again recall *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and that film’s first movement, set at the Dawn of Man. Only here, again, there is a specific (ape) man to follow, rather than a diverse group.

Also, this interlude makes clear the Jekyll-Hyde aspect of *Altered States*, parsing the notion that this is an Icarus story: the tale of a man of science and ingenuity who in his bid to become a god flies too close to the sun and whose wings are singed. Jessup’s impatience to know what lies beyond leads to his bodily transformation (a popular 1980s horror theme) and ultimately, nearly his undoing when he experiences trouble re-constituting his physicality.

Graced by impressive, if occasionally nonsensical special effects sequences, *Altered States* is in every way conceivable a feast for the senses. It appeals in equal parts to the eyes and to the heart and moves at such breakneck speed and with such apparent giddiness at its own ingenuity that’s it like an irresistible force. It starts the 1980s off in fine fashion, and remains one of the most stimulating and enjoyable horror films of the decade.

The Attic

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Commentary

“A fairish, very sober and serious closet-dream-with-horrific overtones. The atmosphere between the possessive father ... and repressed daughter is so close that the film is almost as oppressive for the viewer as for the protagonist.”—Donald C. Willis, *Horror and Science Fiction Films III*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984, page 18.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Carrie Snodgress (Louise Elmore); Ray Milland (Wendell

Elmore); Ruth Cox (Emily Perkins); Rosemary Murphy (Mrs. Perkins); Angel (Dickie the Chimpanzee); Frances Bay (The Librarian); Fern Barry (Mrs. Mooney); Dick Welsbacher (Missing Persons Agent); Joyce Cavarozzi (Secretary); Phil Speary (Travel Agent); Patrick Brennan (David Perkins); Mark Andrews (Marty); Terry Troutt (Donald).

CREW: Forum Productions Ltd., in Association with Raymond M. Dryden. *Casting:* Ruth Conforte. *Director of Photography:* Gary Graver. *Music:* Hod David Schudson. “Who Cares” music by: Hod David Schudson, lyrics by: Maggie Thompson, sung by: Kelly Garrett. “The Ticket” music by: Hod David Schudson, lyrics by: Maggie Thompson, sung by: George Ball. *Film Editor:* Derek Parson. *Story:* Tony Crechales, George Edwards. *Produced by:* Raymond M. Dryden, Phillip Randall. *Executive Producers:* Robert H. Becker, Mel Edelstein. *Co-Producers:* Martin Wiviott, Max Greenberg. *Directed by:* George Edwards. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’ve been drowning most of my life.... How many times do I have to go under before someone throws me a line? ... The truth is, no one ever does ... you save yourself.”—Louise Elmore (Carrie Snodgress) offers advice to her young friend Emily Perkins (Ruth Cox), in the moving character piece, *The Attic*.

SYNOPSIS: Louise Elmore (Snodgress) has been put out to pasture as head librarian after nineteen years because she is suspected of having started a fire there. At home, she lives with her demanding, abusive and wheelchair-bound father Wendell (Milland), who was injured in another suspicious fire years ago, in his department store. Louise lives in mourning over the disappearance of her beloved fiancé, Robert, who vanished on the day of their wedding nineteen years earlier, and dreams that he will someday return for her.

Louise’s friend Emily (Cox) buys her a pet chimp named Dickie (Angel) to help her get over the past, but her evil father has plans for the monkey. Worse, he is not paralyzed at all, as Louise discovers. And in the attic, there are other secrets too...

COMMENTARY: *The Attic* is the sort of horror movie that doesn’t get produced anymore. In fact, it’s an anachronism even in the 1980s, when slasher films and rubber reality monsters were the norm. This touching, emotionally disturbing film is neither of those things, but rather a carefully paced, well-observed character piece about a very sad, almost tragic character. Louise is driven to violence just by life, and there are no monsters or boogymen here, unless you’re counting human suffering and pain.



The Bad Father: Mr. Elmore (Ray Milland) will do *anything* to keep Louise (Snodgress) under his thumb in *The Attic*. *Anything*.

Louise lives a sad and miserable existence and she's attempted suicide because of it; and we see the scars on her wrists. The source of Louise's pain is that one day her fiancé Robert disappeared, never to return. Did he stop loving her? Did he decide he didn't want to get married? Where did he go? Why has he never communicated with her? Was their relationship a lie? These are the questions that consume Louise 24/7; her only solace is in the bottle. For when that wedding day almost two decades ago did not come off as planned, Louise unknowingly traded one future for another. Instead of being with a man who loved her and starting a family, being part of something special, she has been reduced to being what she already was in childhood: slave to her overbearing, monstrous father, an abuser of the worst sort. "You're a mouse, that's what you are," he barks at her.

There have been terrible, cruel parents in films before, even in the 1980s, including Faye Dunaway's Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest* (1980), but Ray Milland's character takes the cake in *The Attic*. He grants Louise not even a moment's peace. She waits on this (supposedly) wheelchair-bound tyrant hand and foot, and constantly rings her bedroom intercom with further demands; so much so that

she cannot even masturbate in peace without his voice ringing out in the night. Worse, he is the cause of Louise's suffering, as she learns in the finale. He not only precluded her happiness, he actually acted to take it away not once, but twice. The evidence waits in the attic.

The Attic is a movie that gets under your skin by degrees, if you have any barometer at all for fairness or decency. As played by Carrie Snodgress, Louise is a decent, sweet person, and endures so much. In one scene, she visits a travel agency, and for a moment, her image is reflected in a poster for Hawaii. It becomes clear then that this is a place she will never see. Instead, she takes the bus back home. It's depressing, but more than that, it's deeply affecting. This is a woman you really empathize with, and watching *The Attic* you will literally come to thirst for the blood of her father.

Several times in the film, director George Edwards rewards that wish by cutting to violent daydreams. These are Louise's visions of revenge. In one, she poisons her father at the dinner table. In another, she imagines him being ripped apart by a gorilla. But these are just phantasms, no more real than her desire to "get away" by traveling to Hawaii. She is paralyzed and can make no escape as long as she dwells in that past.

One of the film's most heart-wrenching scenes involves Louise's visit to the Hotel Eaton, where she hooks up with a young sailor named Richard. She is embarrassed and uneasy. She fantasizes that Richard is actually her fiancé Robert. In fact, she tells him, "It's 1960, and we're in love," before they make love, turning even this human contact into a reflection of the past; a lost opportunity to connect to the present.



Louise (Snodgress) imagines getting that monkey off her back—and killing her father—during a fantasy sequence in *The Attic*.

What remains frustrating about Louise is that she is aware of her trap, and yet she stays. She notes how she is drowning, and that no one will throw her a rope, so she must save herself ... but still she stays. Then finally, she has the courage to kill her father—who has been faking his handicap—and searches the house to find his fortune. Instead, what she discovers in the attic in the film's last scene is her stolen life.

In that final moment, as Louise learns the terrible truth about her father's "love," the camera pulls back. It's a long and slow retraction away from Louise, isolating her there, in the frame, in the attic. Even though she knows the truth now, she will never escape. Her future was locked away in that attic, and now she knows it. When the film fades out a moment later, the viewer is acutely aware that there will be no happy ending for Louise. Not ever.

Appropriately or not, a large number of films have been compared to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and the comparison is almost always forged based on stylistics, on how a director cuts or tells his story. Very few films actually capture *Psycho*'s sense of sadness or loneliness. Norman Bates, played by Anthony Perkins, was a tragic character who could not escape his past no matter how hard he tried. He was a sick person—a murderer—and yet he was also lonely and sweet, desperate for

human contact beyond the cruelty which his mother showed him in life, and which he continued to obsess upon after her death. *The Attic* cannot approach *Psycho* stylistically; in fact, it's a fairly clumsy film from any objective standpoint.

Yet emotionally, the film is an interesting companion piece for Hitchcock's classic, because it also highlights a sick and desperate human, someone so caught up in the past that the present doesn't even exist, or at least not in the way it should. And yes, I would compare Carrie Snodgress's performance here to Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*. There is so much goodness in Louise, so much love and aspiration, and yet it is lost in bitterness and alcoholism. Snodgress understands Louise in a deep, dark way, and so *The Attic* is an emotional film; one so well-acted, so emotionally raw, it hurts. It makes you ache. I wouldn't call it scary, but its approach is unrelenting, and you won't be able to turn away.

The Attic is not written about much in film books, and that's because there are no signature attacks or typical horror movements, and because it doesn't fall into an easily classifiable paradigm like "the savage cinema" or "slasher." But surely genre scholars have missed a worthwhile, low-budget gem here, one of the few films of the last forty years that lays claim to being the legitimate *spiritual* heir to *Psycho*.

The Awakening

★ ★

Critical Reception

"[T]he movie's climax is so filled with impossibilities that we're too busy with the mental rewrite to get scared."—Roger Ebert, *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie*, Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2000, page 25.

"Dreary horror hokum which fails to achieve the desired effect."—Howard Maxford, *The A-Z of Horror Films*. Indiana University Press, 1997, page 26.

"The film is directed ... in a herky-jerky way. Heston supposedly enthralled with the idea of bringing the wicked Kara back to life, has never come so close to losing his dignity. The plot ... seems like a feminized version of *The Omen*."—*People Weekly*, December 15, 1980, page 26.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Charlton Heston (Matthew Corbeck); Susannah York (Jane Turner); Jill Townsend (Anne Corbeck); Stephanie Zimbalist (Margaret Corbeck); Patrick Drury (Paul Whittier); Bruce Myers (Dr. Khalid); Nadim Sawalha (Dr. El Sadek); Ian McDiarmid (Dr. Richter); Ahmed Ossman (Yussef); Miriam Margolyes (Dr. Kadira); Michael Mellinger (Hamid); Leonard Maguire (John Matthews); Ishia Bennison (Nurse); Michael Halphie, Chris Fairbanks, Roger Kemp (Doctors).

CREW: A Robert Solo Production. *Co-Producers:* Andrew Scheinman, Martin Shafer. *Associate Producer:* Harry Benn. *Film Editor:* Terry Rawlings. *Music:* Claude Bolling. *Conducted by:* Marcus Dods. *Production Design:* Michael Stringer. *Director of Photography:* Jack Cardiff. *Screenplay by:* Allan Scott, Chris Bryant, Clive Exton. *Based on the novel* *The Jewel of the Seven Stars* *by:* Bram Stoker. *Producer:* Robert Solo. *Directed by:* Mike Newell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Is there a child on Earth who doesn’t believe in magic?”

SYNOPSIS: Archaeologist Matthew Corbeck (Heston) unearths a queen’s tomb in Egypt, a historical find as important as the discovery of King Tut’s tomb, but finds the burial chamber guarded by an age-old curse. It warns that those who interfere with the nameless queen will see their souls wither. Corbeck and his assistant Jane (York) ignore the curse and open the tomb. At the same time, Corbeck’s wife (Townsend) gives birth to a daughter, Margaret.

Unbeknownst to Corbeck, the soul of the evil Nameless Queen—really Kara—is transferred to his daughter. Eighteen years later, Margaret (Zimbalist) and Corbeck return to Egypt, and begin to become aware of Margaret’s possession by the dark, long-dead ruler. When they bring Kara’s sarcophagus to England, Corbeck attempts to exorcise his adult daughter, even as she begins to mercilessly kill her enemies, including Jane and a psychiatrist (McDiarmid).

COMMENTARY: *The Awakening* is an impressively mounted production, but unpersuasive in presentation for one critical reason: It is mercilessly boring. This must be the dullest horror movie since *The Crater Lake Monster* (1976) even though some of the location work and imagery is beautiful, and the film editing is rather impressive.

On paper *The Awakening* looks like a terrific project. The film was directed by Mike Newell, the gentleman who would later helm *Four*

Weddings and A Funeral (1994), *Donnie Brasco* (1997) and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2004). It's produced by Robert H. Solo, whose career includes such films as *The Devils* (1971) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978). It stars Charlton Heston, whose work in the genre includes *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *The Omega Man* (1971) and *Soylent Green* (1972). Ian McDiarmid is plugging away in there too, and he was the emperor in *Revenge of The Sith* (2005) and other *Star Wars* prequels, so that's all gravy. McDiarmid plays a helpful psychologist, but somehow his is the last face you'd want to see when seeking help about overcoming your own "dark side."

Another bonus: *The Awakening*'s source material arrives straight from Bram Stoker, the creator of *Dracula*, and that's an impressive credential. Yet I find no love in my heart for this thoroughly pedestrian film. Glancing through my notes, I look for anything positive or interesting to discuss. Here's something: The film opens with many views of Egyptian iconography, such as hieroglyphics, but they're kind of wobbly, as if viewed through the ancient waters of the Nile, or time itself. That's neat, isn't it?

Here's another point. When Heston, half-heartedly attempting a British accent, opens the tomb of Kara, the film employs some efficacious quick-cutting. He sledge-hammers the sarcophagus, causing "the curse" to fall, and elsewhere, his pregnant wife collapses in pain, as though feeling the blows herself. Then Heston's baby is born dead, until Kara's sarcophagus is opened and the baby breathes, signifying the transfer of Kara's soul to Heston's child. Again, this is a splendid technique. Makes for interesting viewing. For about two minutes.



Where's the NRA when you need it? Charlton Heston stars as a cursed scientist disturbing an ancient tomb in *The Awakening* (1980).

Those who have compared the film to *The Omen* are right, but there's a critical difference. *The Awakening* doesn't possess the currency of that film (or even its sequels) because there is nothing at stake in the story. In *The Omen*, Gregory Peck's son would become the equivalent of American royalty, and threaten the world as a possible president of the United States. His mission was to bring about the apocalypse, the End Times, as foretold in the Book of Revelations. Contrast that with *The Awakening*. Kara is an ancient, evil Egyptian queen, but if she wants to live again today, what's her plan for world domination? What's an 1,800-year-old evil queen—apparently with self-replacing lip gloss and eyeliner—to do in 20th century England? It's true, it would be unfortunate for her to possess the living soul of Stephanie Zimbalist, because then we'd never get *Remington Steele*, but seriously, shouldn't there be something more at stake here? The film just feels ... insignificant.

The *Omen* films manipulate a relevant mythology in American culture today, namely Christian prophecy, but *The Awakening* feels as old as the pyramids and as dry and lifeless as a desiccated mummy. "May the light from Anubis make you breathe again," a character intones solemnly somewhere along the line, but I wish the light of Anubis had made this not unattractive film breathe with a bit more vitality and

energy.

Beyond Evil

★ ½

Critical Reception

“[S]traight, no-surprises spirit possession stuff is neither original nor silly enough to be amusing.... Donaggio’s score is generally as tacky as what’s on the screen, though the end-credits music is atmospheric.”—Donald C. Willis, *Horror and Science Fiction Films III*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984, pages 23–24.

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Saxon (Larry Andrews); Lynda Day George (Barbara Andrews); Michael Dante (Del Giorgio); Mario Milano (Dr. Albanos); Anne Marisse (Leia); Janice Lynde (Alma); David Opatoshu (Dr. Soloman); Zitto Kazann (Esteban); Beverly Dixon (Nurse); Alan Caillou (Inspector); Jennifer Italiano (Jennifer); Peggy Stewart (Lady Patient); Mickey Carouso (Construction Worker); Chuck Hicks (Hospital Attendant).

CREW: IFI/Scope III in association with Milano Films International Presents a Herb Freed film. *Written by:* Paul Ross and Herb Freed. *Based on a story by:* David Baughn. *Director of Photography:* Ken Plotin. *Film Editor and Second Unit Director:* Rick Westover. *Music by:* Pino Donaggio. *Executive Producer:* Rooven Akiba. *Associate Producer:* James Waters. *Produced by:* David Baughn, Herb Freed. *Casting:* James Waters. *Special Effects:* Joe Quinlivan. *Stunt Coordinator:* Jim Winburn. *Special Photographic Effects by:* James F. Liles. *Directed by:* Herb Freed. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I wouldn’t go over there if I were you. That’s the crypt.”—Dr. Albanos (Milano) warns Barbara (George) away from a dangerous influence in Herb Freed’s *Beyond Evil*.

SYNOPSIS: Working on a condo construction site in the Philippines, married couple Larry and Barbara Andrews (Saxon and George) move into a mansion named Casa Fortuna that hasn’t been inhabited for over a century. They learn from their friend and co-worker Del Giorgio (Dante) that the house is haunted by the spirit of a sorceress named Alma Martin (Lynde) who was murdered by her unfaithful husband, Estaban (Kazann), and whom the villagers believe exists in

the home.

Barbara starts to behave oddly, becoming possessed by Alma Martin. Larry enlists the help of local faith healer Dr. Soloman (Opatoshu) after Barbara pushes Del Giorgio off a ledge, killing him. Larry grows desperate to get his wife back and realizes that her love for him may be the only thing that can undo the “infection” caused by Alma. To help reverse the evil influence, he must first get Barbara’s wedding ring back on her finger, where it belongs.

COMMENTARY: Judging by our horror movies, Americans view themselves as a superstitious, insular and out-of-touch lot. There’s a whole subgenre of horror films in which nice, rich, upper class white Americans visit foreign countries, only to be possessed by evil, ethnic spirits. In the process of exterminating the evil, the Americans invariably receive a lesson in Eastern religions, something that apparently isn’t taught in the nation’s public schools. It’s *Innocents Abroad*, only as though dramatized by Wes Craven instead of Mark Twain.

Examples of this subgenre include *Daughters of Satan* (1971), which occurs in the Philippines, *The House Where Evil Dwells* (1982), set in Japan and starring Doug McClure, and this film, *Beyond Evil*, also set in the Philippines and showcasing the talents of John Saxon and Lynda Day George. The bottom line: Americans overseas should hire exorcists to conduct home inspections before making what appear to be great real estate deals.

Beyond Evil is a low-budget oddity, featuring a variety of what appear to be pre-*Star Wars*-style optical effects, including several instances of time-lapse photography. And yet somehow that seems right, since Herb Freed’s creaky film also fits thematically with 1970s genre cinema, which often focused on the notion of spirit or demonic possession (*The Exorcist* [1973], *Abby* [1976], *Ruby* [1976], etc.). Here, the goings-on at Casa Fortuna really heat up when Barbara is possessed by the spirit of a wicked witch named Alma. The film takes great pains to illuminate this possession in the context of the Andrews’ marriage.

For instance, as the possessed Barbara becomes more sexually aggressive (coming on to Del Giorgio and leading him to the bedroom before killing him), her wedding ring also grows increasingly uncomfortable. In fact, she develops a little red rash and removes the ring, an act that represents the end of the Andrews’ marriage. In the climax, when finally restoring his wife Barbara to normality, Larry

none-too-subtly slips her wedding ring right back on that finger, and the evil spirit is destroyed. He has conquered not only the supernatural evil, but also—at least in some sense—re-established his position of authority as a decisive and in-control husband.

Another 1980s film, *Mausoleum* (1982), involved much the same story featured in *Beyond Evil*, the possession of a “normal” wife, and the subsequent response (less effective there) by her husband, (Marjoe Gortner). But what makes this movie ultimately rather unsatisfying is that Larry is such a wishy-washy character, which is strange for a strongman like Saxon. Larry is constantly dissuaded from seeking help for Barbara. It couldn’t be any other way, or the movie would end in thirty minutes, but the fact that Larry waits so interminably long to address his wife’s odd behavior is either a metaphor about clueless husbands or, more likely, evidence that the script is weak.

Back and forth like a ping-pong ball, Larry goes. He’s worried, then Barbara reassures him. He’s worried and urgent again, then retiring. Well, which is it? There’s no consistency, and so Saxon’s character seems more conflicted than your average Hamlet.

Perhaps there remains one other way of reading this unaccomplished film: It’s all about a woman’s emotional ups and downs, and her husband’s confused attempts to respond effectively. One moment she is happy and content; the next moody and on the verge of insanity. So which is it, spirit possession or PMS?

If *Beyond Evil* has any interest or currency today, it’s surely as an example of that *Innocents Abroad* subgenre. Here, the arrogant Andrews purchase the million dollar Casa Fortuna for a song because the villagers believe it is haunted. The couple soon pays the hidden cost, however, because the house is too good to be true. Then the Andrews must depend on the very villagers who they ignored in the first place. Here, Dr. Soloman, a “faith healer,” is the only one who can possibly help Barbara, but he is ignored until things have gone too far. The subtext is that Americans may be wealthy, but they’ve lost touch with spirituality, and by foolishly stepping out of the West, pay the price for their ignorance. Of course, it would be refreshing to see this story in a film that isn’t so cheesy, awkwardly directed, and filled wall-to-wall with laughable special effects.

Critical Reception

“Logic aside, this throwback to the creature cycle of the 1950s fails to deliver on action, suspense and the gore promised in its title.”—Gene Wright, *The Science Fiction Image: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Science Fiction in Film, TV, Radio and the Theatre*, Facts on File Publications, 1983, page 49.

Yet another pale copy of *Jaws* without the verve or originality.... Nothing that happens in the film has a credible motivation. Why do people persist on running out onto the lethal beach?”—Steven Dimeo, *Cinefantastique* Volume 11, Number 1, Summer 1981, page 48.

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Huffman (Harry); Marianna Hill (Catherine); John Saxon (Captain Pearson); Otis Young (Piantadosi); Stefan Giersach (Dimitrios); Burt Young (Sgt. Royko); Darrell Fetty (Hoagy); Lynne Marta (Jo); Eleanor Zee (Mrs. Selden); Pamela McMyler (Mrs. Hench); Harriet Medin (Ruth); Mickey Fox (Moose).

CREW: Jerry Gross presents a Sir Run Run Shaw and Sidney Beckerman Presentation. *Art Director:* William Sandell. *Film Editor:* Gary Griffen. *Editorial Consultant:* Bud S. Isaacs. *Associate Producer:* Neil Canton. *Director of Photography:* Steve Poster. *Music:* Gil Melle. *Screenplay by:* Jeffrey Bloom. *Story by:* Jeffrey Bloom, Steven Nalevansky. *Executive Producer:* Sidney Beckerman. *Produced by:* Steven Nalevansky. *Special Visual Effects:* Dellwyn Rheume. *Creature Design Consultant:* Malcolm Lubliner. *Directed by:* Jeffrey Bloom. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

INCANTATION: Dr. Dimitrios: “Did you know, sergeant, that there are quite a variety of creatures on—and particularly below—God’s green Earth? Each and every one of which is innately capable of a remarkable act commonly known as the regenerative process?”

Sgt. Royko: “Yeah?”—The brain-trust of *Blood Beach* contemplates a monster’s reproduction.

SYNOPSIS: Walking her dog on the beach, a woman is abruptly pulled down into the sand by a carnivorous, subterranean menace. The police are stumped by her disappearance, and soon a kindly bodyguard, Harry (Huffman) and his old girlfriend, Catherine (Hill) attempt to investigate this and subsequent murders on the shore.

The beach is soon nicknamed “blood beach,” and police, including

Sgt. Royko (Young), attempt to find the source of the crimes by bulldozing the landscape. Turns out that a giant, squid-like monster has taken up residence under the boardwalk, and is preparing to reproduce.

COMMENTARY: I was ten years old and living in suburban New Jersey when *Blood Beach* came out, and to this day I still recall the terrifying TV commercials. For years after the advertisements aired, I remained utterly terrified to walk across a beach ... *any beach*. Those brief images of frolicking swimmers suddenly being pulled down into the sand—all the way up to their faces and beyond—was the kind of nightmarish, fantastic image that really stuck with me.

Even as a youngster, I knew it was implausible, but there was something unspeakably horrific about the idea of being pulled under the sand by some unseen, hungry *thing*. Little did I (or my parents) know then that if they had allowed me to go see the film (which they didn't), that image wouldn't have haunted my slumber in the slightest. For *Blood Beach* is not scary. It's the kind of bad movie that rarely gets made any more: Everything from the script and performances to the sound recording is just terrible. Badly paced, *Blood Beach* feels stretched out even at ninety-two minutes, and most disappointingly there's not a whit of suspense.

This is the sort of film that belongs on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, primarily because so many elements of it just seem so bizarre and inappropriate. Like the beachcomber with the T-shirt that reads “Need Gas? Eat Beans.”

Or the inexplicable decision to cross-cut between a dog's decapitation on the beach and a would-be hot sex scene. Are we to believe the two sequences are connected, since a connection is what cross-cutting usually entails? And why does director Jeffrey Bloom feature (in a speaking role) a repulsively greasy business-person who works at the kiosk called Moose's Galley? Moose is a fat hamburger vendor who complains about the lack of business on the boardwalk, and looking at him, I have two very simple questions. First, where did they dig this guy up? And second, would you eat food prepared by him?

One might expect a film set on the beach to be rather lovely, but the blood beach itself looks ugly and washed-out thanks to Steve Poster's drab cinematography. It actually hurts the eye to view *Blood Beach*, and not merely because boom mikes bob into the frame like dive-bombing seagulls. There's an ever-present haze hanging in the air ... like the camera lens needed to be wiped clean.

Musings about the beach bring up images of bikinis, roller coasters, ice-cream waffles and other fun things, but all we get here is an old, nasty, broken-down boardwalk, and it looks like the kind of place you'd never let your kid walk alone. A woman is nearly raped there, but then a man is attacked by the monster, and gets his penis bitten off.

Blood Beach suffers from all kinds of cinematic missteps, including (but not limited to): a musical duet in a bar, a bizarre discussion about socks, ridiculous dialogue ("I'm planning to boogie tomorrow night, and I haven't slept in a week") and a meandering storyline that doesn't generate suspense. At one point, the dependable John Saxon (fresh from *Beyond Evil*) has a great line of dialogue that best explains the whole *Blood Beach* viewing experience.

"Jesus Christ," he exclaims. "What did I do to deserve this?" *Blood Beach* is so bad, it makes you wonder...

Bloody Birthday



Critical Reception

"Because they were born during a full solar eclipse, three angelic children ... become tiny homicidal maniacs.... That brain-dead premise is the dubious starting point for a substandard dead-teen horror."—Mike Mayo, *Videohound's Horror Show: 999 Hair-Raising, Hellish and Humorous Movies*, Visible Ink Press, 1998, page 39.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lori Lethan, Melinda Cordell, Julie Brown, Joe Penny, Bert Kramer, K.C. Martel, Elizabeth Hoy, Billy Jacoby, Andy Freeman, Ben Marley, Erica Hope, Ellen Geer, Daniel Cury, William Boyett, Shane Butterworth, Ward Costello, Michael Dudikoff, Jose Ferrer.

CREW: A Judica Production. *Casting:* Judith Holstra. *Stunt Coordinator:* Reed Allen. *Executive Producers:* Max J. Rosenberg, Daniel H. Blatt. *Producer:* Gerald T. Olson. *Written by:* Ed Hunt, Barry Pearson. *Directed by:* Ed Hunt. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Does anyone know what the word murder means?"—A cop asks a classroom a loaded question during show-and-tell in *Bloody Birthday*.

SYNOPSIS: In Meadowvale on June 1, 1980, teenage lovers Annie Smith and Duke Benson are brutally murdered in the local graveyard, sparking an investigation by Sheriff Brody. His work is cut short when his daughter Debbie and two friends, Curtis and Steven, beat him to death with a baseball bat.

It turns out that the three children share a common astrological oddity: On the day they were born, the sun and the moon blocked Saturn and therefore there is something missing from their personalities—conscience. The three evil children go on a murder spree: Curtis shoots his teacher, Ms. Davis, in the back, and Debbie shoots her sister Beverly through the eyeball with an arrow. The only people who suspect the true nature of the children are neighbors Joyce and her little brother Timmy. Debbie lures them to her house one night, and then she and her friends go all-out to kill the siblings.

COMMENTARY: There's something terribly unnerving about children who function under the radar as straight-faced little murderers. I'm not writing about over-the-top "movie" villains like those featured in *Children of the Corn*, for instance, but rather those that truly seem like real kids, like the memorable (and twisted) Rhoda in *The Bad Seed* (1956), or even on a much lesser scale, the children highlighted in this eighties curiosity, *Bloody Birthday*.

One would be hard-pressed to make the argument that this movie is particularly artistic, but on the other hand, it's an effective little horror show, made doubly-so by the matter-of-fact nature of the three evil children who share a birthday clouded by an astrological conjunction, the "blocking of Saturn" which makes them all lack some important element from their personalities ... in this case, empathy.

Children run amuck can rack up some heavy damage, and *Bloody Birthday* reveals what such moppets can do when bolstered by a sociopathic nature. In one extended and well-done suspense scene, a main character, Joyce—our intrepid final girl—fears that one of the tykes has sprinkled several birthday cakes with rat poison at a backyard birthday party. The film then pauses long enough to feature several shots of unsuspecting kids gobbling the (possibly) contaminated dessert, and it's nearly stomach-churning.

In another tense, carefully orchestrated instant, a child, Timmy, is locked inside a refrigerator in a junkyard, and the audience fears for his safety. To the conscienceless kids, Debbie, Curtis and Steve, this is merely child's play but viewers realize just how dangerous their actions truly are. And that's a crucial part of the film's unusual

alchemy: The kids brazenly misbehave by shooting arrows through peepholes, bludgeoning a teenager with a shovel, and nearly running someone over with a car, but they seem to have no feeling about their actions whatsoever ... except that it's fun. One little girl, Debbie, perhaps the most evil of the bunch, even murders her own father (but makes it look like an accident). There's no sense of loss, no remorse.

Bloody Birthday plays on the universal fear of parents that they have somehow spawned a "bad seed," just like that great movie of the 1950s, a child who is handicapped by a lack of empathy and compassion. But where *The Bad Seed* was overtly theatrical (and therefore, in some sense, artificial), *Bloody Birthday* apes John Carpenter's more naturalistic *Halloween* in approach. Dialogue is bland, but realistic. Characters are adequately differentiated, but hardly colorful. Life in middle America is depicted truthfully as casual and perhaps a little bland, and therefore the sudden intrusion of "evil" is all the more shocking, and effective.

Any film about the antics of evil children threatens to border on camp, but *Bloody Birthday* never sacrifices its truthful and natural rhythm for big, easy punchlines. And the finale, in which a sheriff's home security system alternately (and cleverly) proves both useful and detrimental to both the heroes and villains, boasts a modicum of cleverness and low-budget zeal. It would have been easy to make yet another movie about a faceless serial killer stalking suburbia, but the makers of *Bloody Birthday* have chosen a different route, and the result is a film that's better than its reputation indicates.

In the 1980s era of "latch key" children—unsupervised and with few restrictions—the murderous *Bloody Birthday* moppets have an independence that is downright frightening. They also have a pass from the adult community, since so many folks find it impossible to believe that a child could commit such horrible acts. In fact, the film ends with the requisite 1980 cliché, the escape of one of the three monsters, Debbie, and the continuation of her killing spree in a new town. Whereas in films like *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, evil is acknowledged, in *Bloody Birthday*, society can't bring itself to punish the bad seeds.

The Boogeyman

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Suzanna Love (Lacey); Ron James (Jake); John Carradine (Dr. Warren); Nicholas Love (Willy); Llewelyn Thomas (Father Reilly); Felicite Morgan (Helen); Raymond Boyden (Kevin); Jay Wright (Young Willy); Catherine Tambini (Katy); Bill Rayburn (Ernest); Jane Pratt (Jane); Natasha Schiano (Young Lacey); Gillian Gordon (Mother); Howard Grant (Lover); Lucinda Ziesing (Susan); Katiey Casey, Ernest Meier, Stony Richards, Claudia Porcell (Teens).

CREW: Jerry Gross presents a film by Ulli Lommel. *Executive Producer:* Wolf Schmidt. *Associate Producer:* Terrell Tannen. *Directors of Photography:* David Sperling, Jochen Breitenstein. *Special Effects:* Craig Harris. *Film Editor:* Terrell Tannen. *Music composed and conducted by:* Tim Krog. *Screenplay by:* Ulli Lommel, Suzanna Love, David Heschel. *Directed and produced by:* Ulli Lommel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

INCANTATION: “When you break a mirror, you free everything it’s seen.”—A character points the way to salvation in Ulli Lommel’s *The Boogeyman*.

SYNOPSIS: Years ago, little siblings Lacey (Love) and Willie (Nicholas Love) witnessed their mother and her lover involved in a kinky sex game. But the frustrated lover tied Willie up to the boy’s headboard and gagged him to keep him from interfering in the “game” and spying on them. Then Lacey freed Willie from his restraints and brought him a butcher knife from the kitchen, which he then used to stab the man to death.

Now Willie (a mute) and Lacey have grown up and are living on a farm, but still haunted by the past. They have sought help from a priest and a psychologist (Carradine), but the only way to exorcise the past is to visit the house where they grew up. There, they discover that the large mirror from their mother’s bedroom actually contains the murderous spirit of the long-dead “lover.”

The possessed mirror is eventually shattered, but Willie and Lacey bring it to the farm and re-assemble it, only to learn that even a single fragment of the possessed looking-glass can wreak havoc. With Lacey’s family imperiled, the only answer involves getting rid of the mirror pieces once and for all, at the bottom of a well.

COMMENTARY: The “crime in the past” or “deadly preamble” is one of the most potent building blocks of the horror film genre in the 1980s. Without a crime in the past committed by the people of Springwood, supernatural avenger Freddy Krueger could not rise to

kill Elm Street children in their dreams. Without the crime in the past, Jason's mother would have no cause to hate camp counselors and undertake a murderous rampage against them. Also known in some quarters as "the transgression," the crime in the past is that event which so traumatizes a character in a movie that a whole new world of horror dawns because of it.

Ulli Lommel's *The Boogeyman* is a film with a fetishistic obsession on a crime in the past, one that occurred twenty years before the story proper. The movie opens with this "deadly preamble." Some creepy synthesizer music pounds on the soundtrack, and the first shot is of a middle-class house by night. The audience watches as two children peer through the window and spy on things getting kinky between Mom and her beau in the bedroom. Mom puts a stocking cap over her lover's head, and the world of adult sex is exposed to the young, and through an act of double voyeurism to us as well (the audience watches the children watching the adults). Then the boyfriend ties Willie to the bed in his room and gags him for spying, and things just escalate from there, from kinky sex to childhood trauma, and ultimately to murder.

Twenty years later, with Willie and Lacey grown, the horror of that night remains emblazoned in their eyes. At one point, there's a close-up of a knife slicing a cooked turkey, a reminder to Lacey of the night of the murder, both in the choice of implement (a knife) and the setting (a "family" dinner.) In another sequence, a knife is sharpened before Lacey's eyes, ready to plunge into the back of that killer again. The point is that she can't escape the obsession with that trauma in the past, and neither can Willie, though he's tried ... by painting mirrors black.

That brings us to the mirror. It contains the "evil." When Willie and Lacey face themselves in the mirror, they face that past, and that's why Willie tries to stamp it out by painting the glass black. He needn't face himself if the mirror doesn't show his reflection.

Considering the fetishistic obsession on the events of the deadly preamble, it is not difficult to discern that "the Boogeyman" of the title is not actually a person, but the memory of that traumatic night, and how it has impacted the family over the years. The mirror is a strange metaphor for the buried family secret and the childhood terror that has never been dealt with. Otherwise, the horror in the film comes not from a mobile boogeyman committing crimes, but rather a mirror that reflects the terror of a particular instant.

In a pinch, director Lommel can find exactly the right angle to express a mood (such as the scene in the barn featuring a long slow pullback to a high angle, away from Willie and Lacey, emphasizing their vulnerability).

However, in the final analysis, *The Boogeyman* isn't very coherent. Late in the film, some mirror shards go astray and end up murdering a group of horny teens ... a subplot far afield from the childhood sexual trauma of the family.

Ultimately, the film becomes a series of loosely connected murders. Some of the deaths are inventive, particularly when one teen, Jenny, is pushed into an already impaled lover open-mouthed. Other than that, not much happens in *The Boogeyman*: implements levitate and kill people, and that's it. There's lots of heavy breathing on the soundtrack, and more than once, a boom mike dips into view.

The best part of *The Boogeyman* may just be the classic promotional art that accompanied the film, a view of Lacey inside a window frame, banging to escape while a menacing shadow (the Boogeyman, I presume) eclipses it.

LEGACY: *The Boogeyman* made a big splash in 1980, and a sequel consisting mostly of clips from the original was released in 1983. In 2005, another film also called *Boogeyman* and dealing with childhood traumas was released under the auspices of producer Sam Raimi. The films bear no connection other than title and theme.

The Changeling

★★★★

Critical Reception

“[A] visually classy chiller ... aided by stunning film locations in Seattle and Vancouver, this one's more attractive than most.”—Edwin Miller, *Seventeen*, April 1980, page 75.

“*The most noteworthy traditional ghost movie of the last fifteen years or so ... a chilling and undeservedly obscure film ... a first-rate Gothic gooseflesher, with excellent performances...*”—Bruce Lanier Wright, *Night Walkers: Gothic Horror Movies, The Modern Era*, Taylor Publishing Company, 1995, page 158.

“...engrossing...”—Lynn Minton, *McCalls*, April 1980, page 190.

“[A] classy picture made by people with some sense of suspense, and performed by people with a cast headed by two of the best—George C. Scott and Melvyn Douglas.... This is not a movie with ghosts jumping at you to elicit fraudulent screams. This is creepy, stealthy suspense.”—Gene Shalit, *The Ladies Home Journal*, July 1980, pages 24, 28.

“... Peter Medak ... directs with great skill. But it is Scott, using the full range of his immense talent, who gives the story its spine-tingling impact.... If you like *Amityville Horror* this is for you—the best chiller so far this year.”—Richard Grenier, *Cosmopolitan*, May 1980, page 10.

“If certain elements of a recent horror franchise from Japan ‘ring’ a bell, it’s probably because you’ve seen *The Changeling*. In fact, until *The Ring*’s final half hour, where it started going off in an interesting direction, much of the film seemed almost a remake of *The Changeling*. But if you’re going to rip off a horror film, you could do worse than this. *The Changeling* offers an old fashioned ghost story in an era where that was decidedly passé. George C. Scott effectively gives us a grief-stricken composer-teacher whose pain becomes a conduit for supernatural dealings. Director Peter Medak brings a stylish look and feel to the proceedings. The film falls apart a little during its final act, but much can be forgiven in a film that so nicely sets up its basic premise. George C. Scott tearing through an old store room to reveal a hidden stairwell, brings to mind the primeval explorer in all of us, searching for a bug or some other nastiness, but unable to stop once the pursuit begins. Fine music, fine atmosphere, and hurt a little by Trish Van Devere being chased by a wheelchair. I’m sure it was meant to be scary, but it smacks of a cliché forced into the film. Love the wet rubber ball, though.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: George C. Scott (John Russell); Trish Van Devere (Claire Norman); Melvyn Douglas (Senator Carmichael); John Colicos (Captain DeWitt); Barry Morse (Parapsychologist); Madeline Thornton-Sherwood (Mrs. Norman); Helen Burns (Leah Harmon); Eric Christmas (Albert Harmon); Frances Hyland (Mrs. Grey); Ruth Springfield (Minnie Huxley); James B. Douglas (Eugene Carmichael); J. Kenneth Campbell (Security Guard); Roberta Maxwell (Mr. Tuttle); Bernard Behrens (Robert Lingstrom); Jean Marsh (Joanne Russell).

CREW: Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna present a Joel B. Michaels and Garth H. Drabinsky Production, a film by Peter Medak. *Film*

Editor: Lilla Pederson. *Supervising Editor:* Lou Lombardo. *Director of Photography:* John Coquillon. *Production Designer:* Trevor Williams. *Story:* Russell Hunter. *Screenplay by:* William Gray and Diana Maddox. *Produced by:* Joel B. Michael and Garth H. Drabinsky. *Music Box Theme by:* Howard Blake. *Costume Design:* Roberta Warner. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Gene Grigg. *Directed by:* Peter Medak. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 115 minutes.

INCANTATION: “That house is not fit to live in. No one’s been able to live in it. It doesn’t want people.”—Minnie Huxley (Ruth Springford) warns John Russell (George C. Scott) about his new rental property in Peter Medak’s chilling *The Changeling*.

P.O.V.

“The house was just an ordinary house in the original story, and I insisted that they build a house which didn’t exist. The way they were going to do the movie was that it was a haunting story in a tiny little house which didn’t look like it was haunted. I said I’d do the movie, but it has to look like the classical ghost stories of old times. Four weeks before we started shooting, the house didn’t exist.”¹—Director Peter Medak describes the formative period creating *The Changeling*.

SYNOPSIS: Following the tragic death of his wife and daughter, famous pianist and composer John Russell (Scott) moves to Seattle and rents an imposing old mansion that hasn’t been occupied in a dozen years. Before long, Russell hears a strange thumping sound in the house and experiences other disturbances too, including a vision of a dead child in a bathtub.

John discovers a sealed room in an upper attic, evidence of a child’s dark and secret death ... and his replacement by another, a “changeling.” This discovery leads Russell all the way back to a prominent Senator named Carmichael (Douglas) and a terrible truth about his origins in life. The angry spirit dwelling in Russell’s house wants vengeance, and is able to manipulate the tools of the living—including a massive wheelchair—to see justice meted out.

COMMENTARY: Directed by Peter Medak, *The Changeling* is a stylish, exquisitely crafted, and damn scary haunted house movie. My problem with many films of this subgenre is purely and simply that oftentimes the owners or denizens of haunted houses remain in “occupied” abodes long past reason, long past sanity, until it’s too late. You just want to shout at the characters on screen “*Get out now!*” But of course, they never do, because then the movie would be over.

Craftily, *The Changeling* dispenses with this long-standing cliché and permits its main character the rarely coupled traits of intelligence and insight. In an unexpectedly emotional and powerful performance, George C. Scott portrays a lonely composer who has suffered a great tragedy in his personal life (the death of his family) and to whom the mystery of the haunted house—and the specter of life after death—is like a siren call; a way to distract himself from the isolation and loneliness that nearly consumes him while simultaneously convincing him that his family is not, truly, lost.

Indeed, *The Changeling* makes the point that the spirit in Scott's house is likewise drawn to him for that very reason. "You've suffered a cruel loss, John Russell," a medium informs him. "A presence is reaching out to you...."

That presence, unlike ghosts in some less interesting movies, is not pure evil, but rather commendably ambiguous. It's like a human being at times, contradictory and emotional. It's full of rage, anger, and frustration but still not really something to define as malevolent. It owns the mansion-like home at the center of the film's action, and Peter Medak lets his roving camera glide through the vast chambers and hallways, always low to the ground, favoring long shots that—not unlike Kubrick's *The Shining*—appear to chart the physical "space" of isolation.

The Changeling begins in splendid fashion, in snowy upstate New York on November 27, as Scott's family is killed in a terrible accident. The movie spotlights to a sentimental piano score, which underlies views of an empty apartment, again seen in long shots. These views establish Scott's isolation, his loneliness, his need to find solace. Before long, he's moved to Seattle. When he finds his house, *The Changeling* provides a high-angle view looking down the long staircase to the first floor, where Scott, a large man, looks small and vulnerable. The sense of the sinister and ominous is palpable.

In these early moments set inside in the haunted house, *The Changeling* earns its stripes as a classic. There's rattling and thumping in the house emanating from somewhere on the grounds—and is that a cry? A moan? The terror mounts as Scott is drawn to a music box which plays the very tune he has been composing, which is much more than an eerie coincidence. Finally, in a famous and spine-tingling scene (parodied in *Scary Movie 2* years later), the toy ball that belonged to Scott's dead child (and was seen in the apartment in New York in the first scene) bounces slowly down the vast stairs in the grand central hallway. Disturbed, Scott drives away with it and throws it off a

bridge into the sea far below. When he returns home, he enters the alcove and the ball bounces down the stairs again, capturing perfectly the notion of a bridge to the world of the dead. Does his child want him to pursue this mystery? Is that the connection? Or is a darker spirit playing with his vulnerabilities?

The movie drops such effective atmospherics and settles down to explain precisely what crime in the past transpired in Russell's new home. As the title indicates, that transgression involves the substitution of one child for another, and all in the eternal pursuit of money. It's a secret that would change the very life of a prominent citizen, a Senator, if revealed. "It's the truth," says Russell, "You're the beneficiary of the cruelest kind of murder: murder for profit."

The secret in *The Changeling*, a mixture of politics and the supernatural, is that a Senator who appears to be one thing, is something else altogether. This is an early example of the "don't worry, be happy"/"be afraid, be afraid" duality of the 1980s; the placid, normal surface that shrouds a terrible secret. There's even a joke in the film about the Senator becoming a Republican after being a Democrat for a long time, which clearly ties the elderly Senator to a presidential candidate in 1980 named Reagan, who charted a similar political trajectory.

The last half-hour is a disappointment as the secrets are revealed one after the other, and the ghost of a wronged soul finally takes vengeance, using bi-location. The film only really and truly goes over the top when the dead child's wheelchair comes to life and starts attacking people. Ultimately, *The Changeling* can't sustain its eerie mood once the key mystery has been solved, but that's understandable. Credit the film with boasting a logical premise and following through with it while rarely resorting to theatrics or cheap gimmicks. Everything pans out just as it seems it should, given the identities of the characters and the details of the plot, but it's a shame that the mood of horror doesn't quite last until the picture's climax.

Still, none of this suggests that *The Changeling* isn't a superior addition to the haunted house subgenre, the best such film, perhaps, since *The Legend of Hell House* in 1974. Horror is almost always effective when a lead character is sympathetic and interesting, and in this case, *The Changeling* forges a connection between the hero's sense of loss, and the mystery that enfolds him at his new home.

Often times, critics claim (perhaps erroneously) that females are superior as "victims" or protagonists in horror films, because they are

more easily terrified and audiences are more easily terrified for them. Perhaps the greatest compliment that can be paid *The Changeling* is that even though George C. Scott, General Patton himself and an actor of supreme authority, serves as the film's stalwart hero, the movie is damn frightening. Even Scott, of booming voice and corpulent body, seems threatened and genuinely endangered by the dark secrets and empty spaces dominating that haunted house.

That's a magnificent accomplishment, and just one of many reasons why *The Changeling* is a wondrous and marvelously chilling horror film.

The Children

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Expendable as it is, *The Children* may serve as a useful audition film for director Max Kalmanowitz and cinematographer Barry Abrams, who leave a few hints that they might do interesting work if entrusted with an intriguing script and a professional cast. Every so often, an inventive, eerie shot betrays the presence of a fitfully effective visual imagination somewhere behind the camera."—Gary Arnold, *The Washington Post*, "The Children: Have You Hugged Your Ghoul Today?", July 9, 1980, page B6.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Martin Shakar (John Freemont); Gil Rogers (Sheriff Billy Hart); Gale Garnett (Cathy Freemont); Jessie Abrams (Clarkie); Clara Evans (Jennie); Julie Carrier (Janet); Nathanael Albright (Tommy); Gracy Griswold (Deputy Harry Timmons); Michelle LeMothe (Dr. Joyce Gould); Suzanne Barnes (Leslie Button); Rita Montone (Dee Dee Shore); John Codiglia (Jackson Lane); Michael Carrier (Bob Chandler); Diane Deckard (Rita Chandler); June Berry (Waitress); Martin Brennan (Sanford Butler-Jones); David Platt (Chauffeur); Edward Terry (Hank); Peter Maloney (Frank); Shannon Bolin (Molly); Joy Glaccum (Suzie MacKenzie).

CREW: *Presented by:* Albright Films. *Director of Photography:* Barry Abrams. *Screenplay:* Carlton J. Albright, Edward Terry. *Production:* Carlton J. Albright. *Co-Producer:* Max Kalmanowicz. *Film Editor:* Nikki Wessling. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Camera Operator:* Braden Lutz. *Makeup:* Carla White. *Casting:* Pat Sweeney. *Nude Painting:* Rez

Williams. Directed by: Max Kalmanowicz. MPAA Rating R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The nuclear generating facility owned by Yankee Power Company, and very near the quiet town of Ravensback, suffers a major malfunction and begins to leak a poisonous black substance. A school bus filled with children passes through a cloud of radiation and the innocent little tykes are transformed into black-fingernailed monsters whose touch instantaneously dissolves human flesh. The children return to their homes, exchanging hugs from their parents for crispy, acrid death.

The town's sheriff (Rogers) and a parent John Freeman (Shakar), whose wife is pregnant, learn of the shocking turn of events and attempt to stop the rampage of the zombie-like children. Unfortunately, the only way to kill the affected offspring is to lop off their hands, the source of their power. After a bloody night in which the children lay siege to the Freeman home, the threat of the Children is finally destroyed. And then Mrs. Freeman goes into labor...

COMMENTARY: *The Children* is a gung-ho horror movie that has the courage of its (admittedly insane) convictions, and before it ends, comes to redefine the meaning of the term "nuclear family." Diffident, rambling and barely coherent in its first hour, Max Kalmanowicz's movie picks up significantly in its last half hour, and becomes a literal and figurative blast.

Nuclear power was a significant national bugaboo in the late 1970s and early 1980s, thanks to the Three Mile Island incident and entertainment like *The China Syndrome* (1978). Images of nuclear disaster proliferate in eighties horror cinema in films such as *Dreamscape* (1984) and *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), and *The Children* is another prominent, though kooky example. "When man entered the atomic age he opened a door to a new world," a wise scientist intoned at the conclusion of the 1954 giant ant film, *Them!* And 1980s horror cinema continued to walk through that door, warning against an apocalypse of our own making.

In horror movies, children always represent the future—a better tomorrow—so if the children die, or are converted to evil, the future of the human race is destroyed. In *The Children*, the none-too-subtle message is that nuclear power is a serious menace, and it is the children (symbolizing tomorrow) who will pay for that danger, becoming horrible zombies and turning savage on their unsuspecting parents.

Kalmanowicz handles this theme in clever, even subtle fashion. Despite all the evil the children do, the film (at least subconsciously) still sees them as kids. There's a moment near the climax wherein a tire swing is framed swaying from a tree as the sheriff happens by in search of the little monsters. That the tire swing was just in use (thus swinging) indicates that the children were playing, that on some level they remain human children, obsessed with childish things. That's a potent idea that brings the tragedy of this nuclear accident home.



Before: An innocent hug between mother and daughter turns deadly in *The Children* (1980). (Actors unidentified.)



After: An innocent hug between mother and daughter turns deadly in *The Children* (1980). (Actors unidentified.)

And indeed, many family members die or are injured because they can't cope with the idea that children are murderers and monsters. "No, they're only children!" a character shouts at one point, and Kathy, Clarkie's mom, seems incapable of facing how her life has changed, thereby endangering the other survivors.

The Children doesn't often shy away from depicting the violence necessary to kill the evil children. Case in point, before the end of the film, a child takes a shotgun blast in the gut at close range and hurtles backwards off a staircase. That's the kind of spiky image one isn't likely to find in the 21st century's PG-13, politically correct horror films. Even more so, much of the film involves Sheriff Hart using a sword to lop off the hands of the little mutants ... another startling and utterly violent image. True, there is a long, decorous pull-back away from the barn at the climax so the audience does not witness the final massacre of the children, but overall, this is a movie that doesn't pull its punches, which is incredible given the tenderness of the subject matter.

The ludicrous, "sting in the tail/tale" ending, features a unique birth. It not only sets up a sequel that never came, it serves much the same function as the conclusion of *It's Alive* (1973), the film's spiritual

ancestor from the previous decade. The birth of another monstrosity in Ravensback warns that the danger is not over and will never be over ... not so long as nuclear power is unsafe and unregulated. All our children are endangered, the ending warns.

Some of *The Children* is indeed dreck, particularly in the first half. For instance, the film's sense of time seems off, or at least confused. In one scene, Clarkie is told to get ready for bed, but his mother hasn't yet realized that his sister Jennifer (one of the infected) hasn't arrived from school yet. Then when the sheriff drops by, she invites him to dinner. I guess Clarkie doesn't get dinner before bedtime? Usually there's an order to the afternoon ritual: sons (and daughters!) arrive home from school, are served dinner, then go to bed. That's jumbled here.

Despite lapses like that, the film boasts a terrific and creepy score by *Friday the 13th*'s Harry Manfredini, some nice "shaky cam" moments as the children nose over tombstones in a graveyard to attack their prey, and that go-for-broke, let's-destroy-the-children-in-plain-view aesthetic (off with their hands!). Since this bizarre low-budget film is also evocative of its epoch, dealing with the nuclear nightmare of the 1980s, that seems like more than enough to recommend it.

Death Ship

★ ★

Critical Reception

"After an atmospheric beginning, the film lurches into a steep dive—down to the depths of its script and direction."—Gene Wright, *Horrorshows: The A-To-Z of Horror In Film, TV, Radio and Theater*, Facts on File Publications, 1986, page 175.

Cast and Crew

CAST: George Kennedy (Captain Ashland); Richard Crenna (Trevor Marshall); Nick Mancuso (Nick); Sally Ann Howes (Margaret Marshall); Kate Reid (Sylvia); Victoria Burgoine (Lori); Jennifer McKinney (Robin Marshall); Danny Higham (Ben Marshall); Saul Rubinek (Jackie); Lee Murray (Parsons); Doug Smith (Seaman # 1); Tony Sherwood (Seaman # 2).

CREW: *Presented by:* Sandy Howard and Harold Greenberg. *Film Editor:* Mike Campbell. *Sound Designer and Post Production:* Bill Trent.

Production Design: Chris Burke. *Director of Photography:* Rene Vernier. *Music by:* Ibo Slangy. *Screenplay:* John Robins. *Story:* Jack Hill, David P. Lewis. *Producers:* Derek Gibson, Harold Greenberg. *Stunt Coordinator:* Grant Page. *Advisor in German Memorabilia:* Andre Genes. *Directed by:* Alain Rakoff. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION: “This ship needs blood, Marshall. Blood to survive. *Your blood.* The blood of your wife. The blood of your children.”—A sea cruise goes horribly wrong in *Death Ship* as Captain Ashland (George Kennedy) becomes an agent for a Nazi evil.

SYNOPSIS: A mysterious World War II-era sea vessel rams and sinks an ocean liner, leaving only a handful of desperate survivors including Captain Ashland (Kennedy), his replacement, Marshall (Crenna), Marshall’s wife and kids (Howes, McKinney, Higham), a kindly passenger Sylvia (Reid), a band leader (Rubinek), and two young lovers (Mancuso, Burgoyne).

They board the ghost ship only to face terror when the band leader dies after being “accidentally” hoisted off deck and dropped into the ocean ... and into the ship’s propellers. Meanwhile, Captain Ashland hears strange voices and experiences unusual visions, while Sylvia is poisoned after eating 45-year-old mints. Before long, the survivors realize that their new ship is a Nazi interrogation ship, used in the torture and execution of hundreds of prisoners during World War II.

Worse, Ashland has become possessed by the Nazi evil, and now believes he is the captain of this evil vessel. As the survivors die, one by one in horrible fashion, Marshall and his family must escape the death ship and Ashland once and for all.

COMMENTARY: Once a Nazi torture ship, always a Nazi torture ship. That’s the lesson of *Death Ship*, a sort of *Amityville Horror* or *The Shining* on the high seas, with George Kennedy in the role of a man undergoing what the characters in *Witchboard* (1986) call “progressive entrapment.” For us laymen, that’s fancy terminology for spiritual possession.

I had high hopes for *Death Ship* because my beef with the haunted house subgenre is that the residents of the haunted house always stay in there much too long. My motto: “The walls bleed? See ya!” But not in these movies. In the cinematic world, characters find all ways of rationalizing toilets oozing blood, or levitating cutlery, and thus remain in the home until every member of their family is endangered. I hoped *Death Ship* could avoid such pitfalls because there’s simply

nowhere to run on a haunted sea vessel. Characters can't just jump in the ocean. There are survival matters at hand that preclude an easy escape. So for once, the format could really make sense. The feeling of entrapment should be palpable.

But *Death Ship* is a disappointing film, and furthermore one that is incompetently made. In early moments, for instance, the Nazi death ship changes course by itself to intercept the love boat, and the two ships are depicted in different shots, cross-cut together. Only problem is that it's day on the sea where the Death Ship is and nighttime at the cruise ship.

Then the crash itself is dramatized in underwhelming fashion. There are no shots of the ships colliding, which would have proven expensive and required some special effects, and no shots of either ship sinking either. An engine room fills with water and then *boom*, the film cuts to the waves beyond and a handful of survivors who have found a piece of wood to cling to. These survivors are all characters that have been introduced previously, but they were all on *different parts of the ship before the crash*. *Death Ship* never shows them fleeing, jumping off the ship, or even paddling together. They just appear together all at once on the driftwood, save the captain. So the film is haphazardly assembled, which makes getting into it quite difficult.

One also must wonder about the death ship's motives. It changes course to destroy the cruise ship, ostensibly so it can get a survivor on board and promote him to commandant (this will be George Kennedy's role). But when the survivors reach the death ship, the evil vessel does everything within its power to keep them from boarding. A stairway collapses to prevent entrance, and then the boat spews oil all over the survivors as they attempt to climb the hull. So which is it: does the death ship cruise the seven seas in search of a captain, sinking any vessel it encounters, or does it just want to be left alone? The movie doesn't decide.

The movie has other problems. The Marshall children run around unsupervised on the vessel for a time, and that doesn't make sense, especially after Saul Rubineck has been impolitely hoisted overboard and another character has shriveled up after eating old mints. And finally, during the mystifying climax, Kennedy—now a full-fledged Nazified freak—stands on the deck of the death ship shouting at it and the heavens in anger. Why? Is he a slave of the death ship or a free man? Again, things in this movie just happen *because*. There's no rhyme or reason.

Not that there aren't some effective jolts. Midway through, one of the characters takes a shower and gets locked in the stall as it fills with blood. She's inundated on all side by the red grue, and it's quite terrifying. But even here, the film undercuts itself by cutting away during the crisis, to—of all things—more escapades of the Marshall children.

Fans of *The Amityville Horror* will also note that *Death Ship* features the discovery of another “red room,” just like the one in that film. Here it's a chamber filled with Nazi flags, swastikas and portraits of Adolf Hitler. The moment of discovery has some real evil power to it, even if the set-up is derivative.

Finally, the movie's “sting in the tail” ending has the death ship going off after another unsuspecting ship, an optimistic set-up for a sequel, no doubt. But again, it doesn't make a lot of sense. If a death ship is taking out ships this regularly (like two in a week) somebody in authority is bound to notice.

LEGACY: In 2002, a film called *Ghost Ship* starring Gabriel Byrne and Julianna Margulies treaded much of the same water, only with far more elaborate and effective special effects. Also, *Ghost Ship*'s poster art is nearly identical to *Death Ship*'s, dominated by a front view of an imposing ship at sea that has evil-looking facial features on the hull.

Don't Answer the Phone



Cast and Crew

CAST: James Westmoreland (Lt. McCabe); Flo Gerrish (Dr. Lindsey Gale); Ben Frank (Sgt. Hatcher); Nicholas Worth (The Strangler/Kirk Smith); Pamela Bryant (Sue Ellen); Paula Warner (Carol); Gail Jensen (Joyce); Denise Galik (Lisa); Dale Katberg (Nurse); Susan Severeid (Hooker); Stan Haze (Adkins); Chris Wallace (Demetrius/The Psychic); Victor Mohica (Ventura); Gary Allen (John Feldon); Michael Castle (Lab Man); Hugh Corcoran (Wino); Joyce Ann Jordan (Roommate); Corine Cook (Rikki); Ellen Kay Karsten (Hooker); Havoc Oliver (Hooker); David Osthout (Policeman); Peter Fain (Policeman).

CREW: A Hammer/Castle Presentation. *Director of Photography:* James Carter. *Film Editor:* Joseph Fineman. *Screenplay by:* Robert Hammer, Richard D. Castle. *Based on “Nightline” by:* Michael Curtis. *Music:* Byron Allred. *Executive Producer:* Michael Towers. *Producers:* Robert

Hammer, Michael D. Castle. *Art Director*: Kathy Cahill. *Stunt Coordinator*: John Sistrunk. *Special Effects*: Dick Albain. *Directed by*: Robert Hammer. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You’re an easy man to be intimate with, McCabe...”—Professional psychologist (and talk show host) Lindsey Gale (Flo Gerrish) finds herself seduced by Lt. McCabe’s (James Westmoreland) plucky charms in a sample of the glittering dialogue from *Don’t Answer the Phone*.

SYNOPSIS: The Strangler, a lunatic Vietnam veteran named Kirk Smith (Worth), is on the loose in Los Angeles, posing as a photographer and raping and murdering beautiful women, including a nurse (Katberg), usually in their homes. He calls in to a radio show hosted by beautiful therapist Dr. Lindsey Gale (Gerrish) under the alias “Ramone,” claiming headaches, but is actually stalking her. He follows one of her patients home from the Valley Free Clinic and murders her, then kills Denise, a hooker, while she is on the air with Gale.

Lt. McCabe (Westmoreland) tracks the obsessed strangler, finding out that he is a porno photographer, but his discovery may be too late. The Strangler has found his way into Gale’s home, binds the woman to a chair, and gets ready for the kill.

COMMENTARY: Formerly known as *The Hollywood Strangler*, *Don’t Answer the Phone*, by any other name, would stink as bad. Of the three hundred-and-something films featured in this book, this was one of the worst and one of the most difficult to sit through. It commits the cardinal sin of bad horror movies: It’s just plain old boring.

Nicholas Worth has appeared in high-profile films, including *Swamp Thing* (1982) and *Darkman* (1990), so he’s certainly capable of turning in a good performance, but he has precious little to work with in this stinker. The film opens with a shot of the bald, distinctive-looking actor, naked from the chest up, standing in front of an icon of Jesus on the cross. Now there’s an image you want to start your movie with: flab and the messiah, perfect together. Later, Worth is half-naked again, lifting weights and mumbling encouraging words to himself about measuring up to his dad. “No one can stop me, ‘cuz I’m too strong, too smart, and too good,” he states at one point, the homicidal equivalent of Al Franken’s Stuart Smalley.

The attacks staged in the film are dull. The acting is flat, and there’s no real story either. Basically, Worth’s character goes around killing

women (strangling them) until he reaches Gale, and then he's stopped. Nothing unpredictable occurs. Nothing interesting happens or is told in such a stylish way that you could forgive the movie its trespasses. One thing distinguishes *Don't Answer the Phone*: sleaze. Cocaine, heroin, porn (oh my!) ... it's all just a degrading tour of human filth. That's okay with me, because human filth can be interesting given the right set of circumstances. It just isn't presented that way here...

Don't Answer the Phone? Don't see the movie...

Don't Go in the House

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dan Grimaldi (Donny Kohler); Robert Osth (Bobby Tuttle); Ruth Dardick (Mrs. Kohler); Charlie Bonet (Ben); Bill Ricci (Vito); Johanna Brushay (Cathy Jordan); Marcy Sheen (Girl in Car); Mary Cann Chin (Woman in Street); Susan Smith (Girl in Market); Colin Melnnes (Little Donny); Ralph D. Bowman (Father Garrity); Nikki Kollins (Farrah); Kim Roberts (Karen); Louise Grimaldi (Barbara); Gloria Szymkovics (Sylvia); O'Mara Leary (Suzanne); Gail Turner (Patty).

CREW: *Presented by:* Turbine Film. *Film Editor:* Jane Kurson. *Music:* Richard Einhorn. *Story:* Joseph R. Masefield. *Screenplay:* Joseph Ellison, Ellen Hammil, Joseph R. Masefield. *Director of Photography:* Oliver Wood. *Special Effects:* Matt Vogel. *Associate Producers:* Matthew Mallinson, Dennis Stephenson. *Directed by:* Joseph Ellison. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A paranoid and lonely man named Donny Kohler (Grimaldi) works at an incinerator, lives at home with his abusive mother (Dardick), and hears voices in his head. One day, he returns home to find his mother dead, and the voices inside tell him that he's "free." Remembering how his mother used to hold his arms over stove top flames and burn the sin from him, he sets out to lure and incinerate beautiful women who make him feel sinful.

He brings a beautiful florist (Brushay) to his dilapidated home, ties her up nude in his basement, pours gasoline all over her, and burns her alive with a flame-thrower. He follows up this horrid crime with two more, and then arranges the three corpses in an upstairs room to keep his mother's corpse company. On a date at the Disco Palace,

Kohler again remembers his torture at a young age, and burns a girl's face with a candle. Then he flees back to his house and picks up two drunk girls, also to kill.

A friend from work and Father Garrity (Bowman), Donny's priest, have a chance of preventing further acts of mutilation and madness, but Donny is angry and burns up Father Garrity too. Then, upstairs in his house of depravity, his victims stage an insurrection...

COMMENTARY: *Don't Go in the House* is "of a piece" with another notorious 1980 horror film, *Maniac*. Both efforts depict a man twisted by his mother's puritanical wrath, a man who matures to become a terrifying lunatic and menace to society. Also, both films end in explicit rebellion against the woman-hating psycho: The dead victims return to life to avenge their untimely deaths, killing the killer. Controversially, both films also focus primarily on the killer as the fulcrum of the tale, not his victims. As a result—in both cases—audiences feel a degree of sympathy for the murderer.

Don't Go in The House is a more roughly made film, however, than *Maniac* (which is saying something...) and at times it's actually difficult to make out what we're supposed to be seeing on screen. Much of the film is under lit, and the sound isn't great either. Yet the film gets one crucial thing right: It makes the viewer care about those who are killed by Donny Kohler, the film's lunatic (played by Dan Grimaldi).

One character, in particular, is truly memorable ... and touching. Johanna Brushay plays Cathy Jordan, an attractive and kind young woman who works nights at a flower shop. Donny makes a point of visiting the shop and ogles Cathy whenever he's there, sometimes after hours. Then, one night, everything comes down to chance and to opportunity as Cathy misses her bus by seconds, and Donny happens to be there to offer her a lift to the next bus stop, just ahead.

At this invitation from a mysterious stranger, one can see all the possible ramifications play out on Cathy's face, and when faced with a long walk and the possibility of encountering street crime, she realizes she has little choice. Then Donny—still wearing his mask of kindness—presses his advantage and asks if she wouldn't mind stopping off at his house for a moment. It's on the way, he assures her. Cathy is clearly uncomfortable with this new course of action, yet she wants to remain polite, and the man is doing her a favor, right?

So Cathy and Donny stop at his house, and she asks to use his phone.

But before long, Donny reveals his true colors, and attacks her. What happens to the lovely and decent Cathy Jordan is truly horrifying and disgusting. She is taken to the basement and is subsequently burned alive in a heart-pounding, stomach-churning scene. One watches as Cathy struggles to break free, and it's agonizing to see her fail in this effort.

Brushay's performance is terrific, and the audience sympathizes with her character at every point along the way during her tragic arc. If *Don't Go In The House* were the total failure that some critics claim, one wouldn't feel so strongly about her character's fate, or feel the pain of her death. And *feeling*, after all, is what horror movies are all about. It's highly ironic that so many commentators criticize horror films for being so serious as to provoke strong emotions, as though it would be better to make a death like this one funny, or inconsequential ... or just plain palatable. *Don't Go in The House* merits comparison to *Maniac* because it takes itself and its lunatic seriously.

Consequently, the death of Cathy Jordan is so powerful that the later deaths take on a new meaning. As Donny stalks new prey, the audience knows precisely what to expect, and so the film's atmosphere grows oppressive, dark, and truly frightening. Had Jordan not been so well-played, had her scenes not so efficiently captured the imagination and sympathy of audiences, the remainder of the film just wouldn't work nearly as efficiently.

In some rough fashion, *Don't Go in The House* concerns itself with the cycle of violence and abuse in our society. Donny Kohler is depicted as a man who was abused by his mother. When he was just a little boy, she would hold his naked arm over an open flame on the stove top and try to burn the evil out of him. "You're a bad boy. You must be punished," she would say. "You're evil." What's ironic is that by treating her boy in such a cruel fashion, Mrs. Koehler indeed assured that her son would grow up to be evil. She thus spawns his hatred of women.

The film's "sting in the tale/tail" concerns the selfsame cycle of violence passed on to another prepubescent boy, a kid named Michael. The camera zooms in on his tearful face as he too "hears the voices," the ones that urge him to kill and to hurt and to take revenge. It's the curse of Donny Kohler re-born, and interestingly, it isn't at all tied to Donny, so the audience can't make the mistake of believing the evil is genetic, inheritable. Instead, the film seems to be building a wider case: that wherever there is cruelty and abuse, this evil will grow again and again.

Useless authority is often depicted in horror films, particularly the slasher efforts of the 1980s. Here, the useless authority is the Catholic clergy. Donny tries to do the right thing at one point. He goes to a priest to confess his sins, but yet even in this effort fails. “The Devil is only a symbol,” a priest nonchalantly tells Donny, admitting that he doesn’t even believe in his own life’s work. “You must forgive your mother,” he adds. This advice, one hastens to add, helps neither Donny nor his victims. It’s all just platitude and balms, and so Donny cries out for help in the only way he knows how ... selecting two further victims.

Don't Look in the House is a dark, gruesome, even depressing film, but it doesn’t adopt the easy stance of many horror movies, depicting a serial killer as somehow standing apart from humanity and being “a monster” outside mankind. Instead, it depicts its killer in understandable, human and even sympathetic terms ... which makes Donny’s brutal actions all the harder to watch. It’s not really a good film, but in some ways, it’s a powerful one, if that’s possible.

Dressed to Kill



Critical Reception

“Suspense-king Hitchcock is dead. Long live the new King, De Palma.”—*Forbes*, December 22, 1980, page 23.

“[De Palma] pulls you in and draws the wires taut or relaxes them; he practically controls your breathing.... He knows where to put the camera and how to make every move count, and his timing is so great that when he wants you to feel something, he gets you every time. His thriller technique, constantly refined, has become insidious, jeweled.”—Pauline Kael, “Master Spy, Master Seducer,” *The New Yorker*, August 4, 1980, page 68.

“*Dressed to Kill* may well be the sex-suspense-comedy that Hitchcock never got to make, and part of the kinky delight of the film is the way De Palma, with a wicked glee and wizardry all his own, takes full advantage of the permissiveness of the times....”—Jake Horsley, *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery, 1958–1999, Volume 1*, The Scarecrow Press, 1999, page 213.

“...the entire movie is an attempt to dress action in veils of illusion, to smudge the line between fantasy and reality. That’s the film’s

downfall. In a few scenes like the one at the art museum, De Palma's expressionism is mesmerizing. But it soon becomes apparent that this virtuosity exists in the film independent of plot and character, neither of which benefits from it."—Colin L. Westerbeck, Jr., "Fashion Statement: Hitchcock as Precious Teenager," *Commonweal*, August 29, 1980, page 467.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Caine (Dr. Robert Elliott); Angie Dickinson (Kate Miller); Nancy Allen (Liz Blake); Keith Gordon (Peter Miller); Dennis Franz (Detective Marino); David Margulies (Dr. Levy); Susanna Clemm (Betty Luce); Ken Baker (Warren Lockman); Brandon Maggart (Cleveland Samm); Amelie Collier (Cleaning Woman); Mary Davenport (Woman in Restaurant); Ameka De Lorenzo (Nurse); Norman Evans (Ted); Robbie L. McDermott (Man in Shower); Bill Randolph (Chase Cabbie); Sean O'Rinn (Museum Cabbie); Fred Weber (Mike Miller); Samm-Art Williams (Subway Cop); Robert Lee Rush (Hood #1); Anthony Boyd Scriven (Hood #2).

CREW: Samuel Z. Arkoff presents a George Litto Production, a Brian De Palma Film. *Film Editor:* Jerry Greenberg. *Costumes:* Ann Roth. *Art Director:* Gary Weist. *Director of Photography:* Ralf Bode. *Music by:* Pino Donaggio. *Conducted by:* Natale Massara. *Produced by:* George Litto. *Casting:* Vic Ramos. *Costume Designer:* Gary Jones. *Written and Directed by:* Brian De Palma. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I'm a girl inside this man's body, and you won't help me get out. Oh, I borrowed your razor...."—The kind of answering machine message you should hope you never get. From Brian De Palma's stirring *Dressed to Kill*.

SYNOPSIS: Kate Miller (Dickinson) is a frustrated New York City housewife, and unhappy in her marriage. She sees a psychiatrist, Dr. Elliott (Caine), about her problems, and even comes on to him, but what she really seeks is ... passion. One day, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kate hooks up with a mysterious stranger and goes back to his apartment for a bit of afternoon delight.

After their tryst, she learns that her lover has a venereal disease and flees the apartment, only to be brutally murdered in the building elevator by a tall blond woman in sun glasses who wields a glittering razor blade. A prostitute named Liz (Allen) witnesses the murder and teams up with Kate's teenage son, a genius inventor named Peter (Gordon), to find out who killed Kate.

The trail leads them right back to Dr. Elliott, who is seeing a psychotic transsexual named Bobbie who is hoping to have a sex change operation. Hoping to get Bobbie's full name (and at the urging of the NYPD's Detective Marino [Franz]), Liz attempts to seduce Dr. Elliott in his office and get a look at his appointment book. Liz doesn't know it, but she is playing with fire, for Dr. Elliott has a most unusual relationship with the enigmatic and dangerous Bobbie...

COMMENTARY: Boiled down to its core storyline, Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* is, like *Psycho* before it, a splintered-psyché story. In this case, a character not unlike Norman Bates, a psychiatrist who harbors two personalities—one male and one female—is driven to commit brutal murder when the dominant one (the female) suspects that the male personality is sexually aroused. This doubling of the psyche is cleverly revealed by director De Palma in a series of cunningly conceived mirror shots that appear periodically throughout the film as the doctor, played by Michael Caine, feels the push of sexual stimulation and gazes at his disapproving reflection.

However, to describe the brilliantly stylized and technically accomplished *Dressed to Kill* in so basic a fashion does it a disservice. This is a formalist film that features virtuoso camerawork, surprising twists and turns, and feels like the artist's personal response to the Hitchcock aesthetic. Some set pieces here are so sweeping, so grandly and fluidly staged, that *Dressed to Kill* becomes hypnotic. Whether it matters or not, those mesmeric moments don't always have much to do with the film's central narrative, about that female and male personality uneasily sharing Dr. Elliot's body.

To the trance-like strains of Pino Donaggio's lush and operatic score, *Dressed to Kill* commences in a bathroom as Angie Dickinson stands in a shower stall and masturbates. An attacker comes up from behind and rapes her ... but it's only a fantasy. The scene features full frontal nudity (via a body double for Dickinson), and is the first clue about the nature of this woman, Kate Miller. She endures fast, uncomfortable sex with her dispassionate husband (she calls his approach to sex "wham bang specials") and longs for some—any—excitement in her life. She goes to visit her psychiatrist and comes onto him, but he's not interested. This early scene is funny because De Palma (and the audience) focus so closely on Kate and her feelings of dissatisfaction that one scarcely notices Caine's Elliott. This is part of the movie's clever misdirection. Kate's visit to Elliott rouses his murderous alter ego, but nobody is aware of this yet.

Instead, *Dressed to Kill* moves on to its best, most gloriously sustained

set piece as Kate attends a showing at an art gallery and unexpectedly encounters a prospective lover. This scene is dominated by flirtatious parries and thrusts between the two characters, misunderstandings and embarrassment. Kate reveals her wedding ring to the stranger accidentally, then realizes what she's done and blushes. He approaches her to give her back a glove; she misunderstands his intent. He leaves, and she follows him.

At this juncture, the camera follows Dickinson through the labyrinth-like museum, tracking her around corners, from one room to the next. Her quarry, the prospective lover is constantly going just out of sight, and the rhythm of the scene intensifies and the score swoons with melodramatic passion. This scene perfectly captures the thrill and danger of a romantic indiscretion like this, and it culminates with Dickinson making love to the man in the back of the taxi cab. By this point, we are totally engaged in Kate and her concerns.

Especially because De Palma plays another trick on the audience. After an afternoon of lovemaking, Kate's lover slumbers and Kate realizes it's time to leave and return her humdrum life with her husband. She tries falteringly to compose a "thank you note," but during one botched attempt ends up looking in a drawer and discovering that her lover has been notified that he has contracted a venereal disease! Highly disturbed now, Kate rushes out of the apartment, accidentally leaving behind her wedding ring.

At this point, the audience is thinking: What if Kate gets caught? What if she has contracted V.D.? What if this one indiscretion has now destroyed her life and family? In the midst of these concerns, Kate retrieves her wedding ring, runs to the elevator and is brutally murdered by a razor blade-wielding blond giant. Twice Kate has faced danger in a confined space (the first time a shower stall; the second time an elevator), only this time the violence is no fantasy. De Palma has pulled the old *Psycho*-Janet Leigh trick, killing the film's ostensible main character early in the proceedings and therefore throwing the audience off balance. In the way that Hitchcock made audiences feel concerned that Marion had stolen money from her boss, De Palma has thoroughly engaged viewers in the sexual tryst and unexpectedly disturbing fall-out. So when this brutal, gory, slashing murder occurs, it comes from out of left field and has the desired impact of shocking the audience. Only later do audiences get the connection that the strange woman (also seen briefly at the Art Gallery) is Elliot's alter ego, still mulling over angrily Elliott's brief arousal with Kate that morning.

In these lyrical, lush moments, *Dressed to Kill* fires on all cylinders. There's an elegant simplicity to Brian De Palma's films. The complexity and beauty of his works are almost never in the stories themselves, which seem hackneyed or like Hitchcock leftovers, but in the remarkable way he expresses them; in the fashion in which he uses the full frame and a canny composition to alternately misdirect or reveal some important crumb of character information.

The first half of *Dressed to Kill*, leading up to Kate's death, is so strong, so trance-like, that the film almost sags for a while until viewers have processed everything and moved on to the central mystery focusing on Nancy Allen's hooker and Kate's son, Peter, played by a young and very intense Keith Gordon. *Dressed to Kill* picks up steam again in later scenes that apparently find the captured Elliot escaping from an asylum and stalking Allen. She's in the shower, of course, casting furtive glances outside the bathroom as she spies nurses' shoes nearby. She keeps her eyes on those shoes (and Elliott) while also looking to the medicine cabinet and contemplating her escape. In a shocking moment, the signature razor lashes out and slits her throat in a terrifying jolt, but, like the stinger in *Carrie* (1976), it's all a dream.

Despite the dream (and ensuing "stay awake" shot), this closing sequence is so powerfully dramatized and so terrifying, your heart rate won't slow down for a good fifteen minutes after *Dressed to Kill*. It's that effective.

Not really a conventional slasher film, nor a psychological thriller, *Dressed to Kill*, like so many De Palma films, is its own unique animal. The director borrows many plot points from *Psycho* and Hitchcock, including the Janet Leigh trick, and even the final awkward exposition scene in which a man's psychosis is explained ("He was a transsexual. About to make the final transition"). Even though Hitchcock boasted a terrific sense of gallows humor, De Palma has more of Jean-Luc Godard in him and so there's the sense in a few of these scenes that De Palma is putting the audience on; having a good laugh at his ability to manipulate them. There's something more bawdy, more naughty and more playful in *Dressed to Kill* than in many Hitchcock films, but still, he's playing in the master's court.

Sometimes, by doing so, De Palma comes off as only a second-rate imitator but *Dressed to Kill* is different. De Palma has eaten and digested the *Psycho* aesthetic here, yet he synthesizes something entirely his own in the process. Those fifteen minutes in the art gallery, and the follow-up in the apartment, are the stuff of genius, not derivation. As critic Jake Horsley pointed out, *Dressed to Kill* may very

well be the kind of film Hitchcock would have made had he been permitted do so; one that more nastily and daringly creeps up to the edges of social responsibility and acceptability, but then backs off with a tease.

Fade to Black

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“[A] highly effective film with a superb performance by Dennis Christopher. Its allusions to other films ... makes it a treat for ‘film buffs’ able to spot the references. This knowledge of previous films ironically allows a certain distancing from the action, with the film being thus an examination of the genre itself.”—Robert Cettl, *Serial Killer Cinema: An Analytical Filmography*, McFarland, 2003, page 159.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dennis Christopher (Eric Binford/Cody Jarrett); Tim Thomerson (Dr. Moriarity); Gwynne Gilford (Officer Anne Oshenbull); Normann Burton (Marty Berger); Linda Kerridge (Marilyn O'Connor); Morgan Paull (Gary Bially); James Luisi (Captain Gallagher); Eve Brent Ashe (Aunt Stella); John Steadman (Sam); Marcie Barkin (Stacey); Mickey Rourke (Ritchie); Peter Horton (Joey); Hennen Chambers (Bart); Melinda Fee (Talk Show Host); Anita Converse (Dee Dee); Bob Drew (Reverend Shick).

CREW: Irwin Yablans and Sylvio Tabet present a Leisure Investment Company Movie Ventures Ltd. Production. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Music:* Craig Safan. *Film Editor:* James Mitchell. *Supervising Editor:* Howard Kurnin. *Director of Photography:* Alex Phillips Jr. *Associate Producer:* Joseph Wolf. *Executive Producers:* Irwin Yablans, Sylvio Tabet. *Producers:* George G. Braenstein, Ron Hamady. *Written and Directed by:* Vernon Zimmerman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

INCANTATION: Dr. Moriarity: “I know the human mind. Especially the sick ones.”

Detective Gallagher: “Fuck the mind!”—An exchange between psychologist and cop in Vernon Zimmerman’s *Fade to Black*.

SYNOPSIS: Young Eric Binford (Christopher) lives in the rarified

world of movies, absorbing trivia about Hollywood cinema and the world of celebrities. It's a good thing he's got a hobby, because his real life is far from glamorous. His mother died in childbirth, he's been told, and now he lives with an abusive wheelchair-bound aunt who blames him for his mother's death as well as her own crippled condition.

Disliked by his boss and co-workers, Eric is a lonely fellow, at least until he becomes attracted to a blond bombshell who is a lookalike for Marilyn Monroe. He makes a movie date with her but she stands him up. Inspired by his favorite characters in the movies, Eric dresses up in colorful costumes and begins to kill all those who have wronged him.

As Hopalong Cassidy, as Dracula and as the Mummy, Eric attacks again and again. The tragedy climaxes atop Mann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood as Eric—channeling James Cagney and the anti-hero of *White Heat*—has a “top of the world” moment before his inevitable and final fall.

COMMENTARY: “Why don’t you live in the real world with the rest of us?” Eric Binford is asked in Vernon Zimmerman’s interesting if flawed *Fade to Black*. The movie makes the answer to that interrogative obvious: His real life is painful, unromantic and woefully small. Whereas by contrast, everything appearing on the silver screen is romantic, big, and glorious. The relevant question is actually how could Eric *not* prefer the spotlight (even if it’s the spotlight from a police barricade rather than one at a movie premiere).

In conception and execution, *Fade to Black* is a film not dissimilar to 1971’s rat attack movie, *Willard*. In both films, a poor dorky loner suffers through a miserable existence at home, is abused by co-workers and superiors on the job, and then—surprise, surprise—snaps. In the case of *Willard*, rats befriended the guy, and he outsourced them to execute his murderous wrath. Binford in *Fade to Black* isn’t even that lucky. All he possesses is a love and mastery of movies and movie history. He doesn’t even have living friends; therefore Binford must do all the dirty work himself. Despite commonalities in plot and characters, *Willard* was probably a better film than *Fade to Black*.

Binford’s journey is fascinating, and the movie-related references and death scenes are cleverly vetted, but the other characters around Eric come off in the film as cartoonish and two-dimensional, rather than as real people. Thus *Fade to Black* lacks an essential quality of verisimilitude. It’s not enough of a problem to scuttle the entire enterprise, just a grave distraction.



He's come to suck your blood! Eric Binford (Dennis Christopher) lives in a fantasy world and dresses as Dracula in *Fade to Black* (1980).

Take for example, Dr. Moriarity. Ostensibly the film's hero and an example of useless authority (given the adoption of the slasher paradigm). The audiences understands how the movie actually sees him: He's a *villain*, hence his Sherlock Holmes-inspired name. Moriarity (Tim Thomerson) is given some very lame, stupid lines to recite. He plays harmonica at his desk and snorts cocaine too. He also makes excuses for Binford as a "victim of society," but the Moriarity character is clearly designed as a swipe at liberal psychologists. That's his only purpose, to say stupid things and reflect a popular stereotype (the bleeding heart liberal with his head up his ass).

Binford's aunt is equally trite, the kind of shrew who only exists in horror movies like this one, *976-EVIL* (1989), etc. She's a vindictive, cruel, over-the-top woman simply because the movie requires it of her. Binford must have someone to react against, after all, if he's to take revenge. A more subtle view of humanity, the acknowledgment that people are a jumble of both good and bad, for instance, might have better served the film.

Because *Fade to Black* concerns Eric Binford "resurrecting" movie monsters and playing them during real death "scenes," it's tempting to look at the film as a self-reflexive one. It's a movie about movies, but does *Fade to Black* want viewers to seriously believe that a love of movies inspires madness and psychotic behavior? That's a disproved theorem, and seems antithetical to a love of movies. Instead, I think movies serve a simpler purpose here: They're simply the movies' organizing principle.

The world of movies grants the film its central character (an obsessed fan), the mode of his killings (imitating famous monsters of movieland), as well as the other characters, particularly a girlfriend who's a Marilyn Monroe lookalike. The movies also give the film its climax, a regurgitation of the James Cagney movie, *White Heat*. But because *Fade to Black* never truly settles on how it feels about movies (an escape? a diversion? a spur to kill?), the film at times feels pointless and meandering.

It's a thrill to see the Mummy, Dracula and Hopalong Cassidy resurrected, but in and of themselves, their presence doesn't make

Fade to Black inherently interesting. Why does Binford like these particular icons? Why not the Frankenstein Monster? The Creature from the Black Lagoon? The Amazing Colossal Man? *Fade to Black* knows enough to love these classic films and their characters, but not why it should; and more importantly, not how those characters should affect Binford. Except for the Cagney riff, which film buffs will see coming.

Fade to Black was a kind of *cause celebre* in horror circles for a while leading up to its release, in part because longtime fans are always gratified to see newer films paying homage to classic movie monsters like Dracula or the Mummy. It reminds them that the genre has a respectable history and that oldies are also golden. The fervor died down, however, after the film's release and the movie—though a hit—failed to generate the expected business.

If *Fade to Black* was a disappointment for the horror genre and its adherents, it's because the movie doesn't take enough time to thoughtfully consider its premise: to meditate on the interconnection of movies and the subconscious. You can't raise the dead (like the Mummy) lightly, especially with a plot that then insists that anybody who loves these movies must be insane or at least prone to violence.

Fade to Black should have been rewritten before it was made, because it never evidences a singular narrative through-line. It never settles on how it views horror movies, movies in general, or movie buffs. Since the movie concerns these very subjects, the lack of a coherent motif is a detriment.

The Fog

★★★★

Critical Reception

“Like the best horror films, *The Fog* is held together by a visual motif of perversion, a visually poetic idea. Opaque and amorphous ... the fog is both an expanding medium of death and a shroud.... The most horrifying episodes are often uncannily beautiful, and the movie is beautiful in moments of peace, too ... a genuinely poetic horror film.”—David Denby, *New York*, February 18, 1980.

“As stunningly effective as anything John Carpenter has done to date ... an uneasy venture down a blind alley.”—Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1980.

“Carpenter’s follow-up to *Halloween* had many of us looking forward to the birth of a new horror legend in its director, and many of us felt a little let down, but that was no fault of Carpenter’s. In many ways, *The Fog* is a much more conservative horror film compared to *Halloween*, just with modern sensibilities. For folks looking for *Halloween*-like terror, disappointment was almost inevitable—this was a ghost story with slasher film elements, not a slasher film with supernatural elements.

“But my how the years have been kind to *The Fog*. Watched now it ranks as one of Carpenter’s finest. From its effective music to its creepy stings of fright, along with John Houseman’s spooky storytelling, *The Fog* gives us a scary natural element that never feels natural. The titular mist is nicely realized given the limited special effects of the era, and Hal Holbrook portrays a fascinating personification of modern religion—tired, drunk, and fully aware of skeletons in its closet. Maybe even a little haunted.”—William Latham, *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Adrienne Barbeau (Stevie Wayne); Jamie Lee Curtis (Elizabeth Solley); Janet Leigh (Kathy Williams); John Houseman (Mr. Machen); Tom Atkins (Nick Castle); James Canning (Dick Baxter); Charles Cyphers (Dan O’ Bannon); Nancy Loomis (Sandy Fadel); Ty Mitchell (Andy); Hal Holbrook (Father Malone); John Goff (Al Williams); George “Buck” Flower (Tommy Wallace); Regina Waldon (Mrs. Kobritz); Fred Franklyn (Ashcroft); Rob Bottin (Blake); Darwin Joston (Dr. Phibes); Ric Moreno, Lee Sacks, Tommy Wallace (Ghosts).

CREW: Avco Embassy and E.D.I present a Debra Hill Production. *Production Design:* Tommy Lee Wallace. *Film Editor:* Tommy Lee Wallace, Charles Bornstein. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Music:* John Carpenter. *Special Effects:* Richard Albain, Jr. A&A Special Effects. *Blake Effects:* Rob Bottin, Dean Cundey. *Special Photographic Effects:* James F. Liles. *Executive Producer:* Charles B. Block. *Associate Producers:* Barry Bernardi, Pegi Brotman. *Produced by:* Debra Hill. *Written by:* John Carpenter, Debra Hill. *Directed by:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

P.O.V.

“*The Fog* was the first film that I shot the way it was written. I cut it together, mixed it, looked at it, turned to my partners and said, ‘This is a piece of trash.’ And so a month-and-a-half before release we shot twenty or thirty minutes, re-cut it, re-scored it, and re-released it the

way you see it now.”²—John Carpenter, on the making of *The Fog*.

SYNOPSIS: Old Mr. Machen (Houseman) tells a group of children, including Andy Wayne (Mitchell), a ghost story about the *Elizabeth Dane*, a clipper ship that was lured to its destruction precisely one hundred years ago off the rocky coast of Antonio Bay. Mr. Machen doesn’t know it, but the ghosts of the ship’s crew are returning to Antonio Bay on the hundredth anniversary of the town’s founding, and planning to kill six citizens as revenge against the six conspirators who contributed to the sinking of the vessel.

Radio DJ Stevie Wayne (Barbeau) watches on her radar as a fog bank moves against the wind and encompasses a small fishing boat, the *Sea Grass*. The next day, a friend of the sailors on the *Sea Grass*, Nick (Atkins), and his new girlfriend, a hitchhiker named Elizabeth (Curtis), investigate the ship’s disappearance and begin putting pieces of the puzzle together.

Finally, the centennial of Antonio Bay’s founding comes, and the malevolent fog sweeps into town to claim victims. Under the watchful eye of Wayne (ensconced in a lighthouse), several survivors, including Mrs. Williams (Leigh), her assistant (Loomis), Nick, Andy and Elizabeth seek sanctuary in the village church. There, Father Malone (Holbrook) has learned the secret of the *Elizabeth Dane*’s destruction and discovered that he is a descendant of one of the early six conspirators who doomed the ship, stole its money, and founded the burg. Now, the undead captain of the *Dane*, Blake (Bottin) wants his gold back ... and will murder anyone in his way.

COMMENTARY: John Carpenter, the director who so imaginatively and creatively sparked the slasher formula with his breakthrough hit, *Halloween* (1978), returned to the horror genre in 1980 for something completely different. Instead of creating another memorable “stalk and slash” movie, he turned to the subgenre of the ghost story and conjured up *The Fog*, a remarkably eerie and effective horror movie with a literary bent. Ghost stories originate from the tradition folklore; popular stories of a particular community passed on from one generation to another, often verbally. Given this understanding of the ghost story’s oral tradition, *The Fog* is a film that focuses deeply on the act of storytelling.

To emphasize the importance of storytelling, Carpenter opens with an artful and compelling preamble. Actor John Houseman, his craggy face framed in close-up, recites a century-old ghost story to a group of frightened children huddled around a campfire. The orange light of

the fire flickers on the old man's grizzled visage as he recounts his tale.

The very first shot of *The Fog*, however, is not of Houseman, but of a ticking pocket-watch as it dangles by a chain into the frame. Not only does this close-up immediately establish the time as one of superstition, since midnight is "the witching hour," but the prominence of the clock as it fills the screen is a reminder of passing time, and a symbol of the generation gap between storyteller and listeners. Indeed, as Houseman begins to weave his chilling tale, his word selections belie an obsession with time. It links the distant past with contemporary times; past generations with current ones.

The quotation below represents the prologue of Houseman's story, and the references to time have been italicized to accent them:

11:55. Almost *midnight*. Enough *time* for one more story. One more story before *12:00* just to keep us warm. In *five minutes*, it will be the *21st of April*. *One hundred years ago* on the *21st of April*, out in the waters around Spivey Point, a small clipper ship drew towards land....

This passage is a portion of a folk story told to the fishermen of Antonio Bay by their "fathers and grandfathers," according to the film, a notation which expresses the passage of time and the general sharing of communal stories ... the essence of a good ghost story. And notice that elements of Houseman's tale are repetitive; that's also a key aspect of the oral tradition. One learns them a certain way, and repetition is a key mnemonic device.

These references to time, including the ticking clock and the determinedly repetitive opening dialogue, also serve another master in *The Fog* too. They explicitly set the stage for the horror to come. They serve as exposition, but gloriously and stylishly so. How does one successfully vet a scary ghost story at midnight around a fire? Perhaps by making it feel immediate, by pinpointing a specific time and a place and making it feel real and intimate to the listeners. Mr. Machen's story thus begins by reminding the audience that a fateful anniversary is fast approaching. This revelation fosters an urgency in the audience, and therefore a heightened sense of menace to the listeners.

Suddenly, those around the campfire (as well as those watching the film) are as much a part of this ghost story as the *Elizabeth Dane*, because they are learning of it at midnight, precisely one hundred

years after the ship was wrecked on the shore.

Mr. Machen augments this awareness by pointing out that the ghosts of the *Elizabeth Dane* will rise from their graves to seek out the campfire that resulted in their untimely and watery demise. Of course, the children are seated around that campfire, and therefore—again—are explicitly connected to the horror. The ghosts could arrive for them at any minute, or so the serious-looking children believe. And it actually is that quest on the part of the dead sailors that informs *The Fog*.

As Houseman proceeds in forceful, eloquent tones to enumerate the details of the *Dane* disaster, Carpenter zooms in rapidly on the actor's face as he moves from setting the stage (telling the time) to elaborating on the details of that clipper ship. "Suddenly," Houseman says, and the camera rushes in on his illuminated face, surrounded by darkness, as if it hangs on his every breath, every modulation of tone.

Importantly, the horror that Houseman forges in this sequence is primarily one built by words. This is quite uncommon in contemporary film. A more routine approach, and one adopted by Rupert Wainright in the unfortunate remake of *The Fog*, would have seen a director actually depict the events of a hundred years earlier, and then flash forward to 1980. Of course, by doing that, you lose the cohesive leitmotif of the ghost story passed from generation to generation. Instead of letting that occur, Carpenter takes a subtle approach to the material and permits the venue of the ghost story to provide the film's necessary exposition.

Of course, *The Fog* is a film, not a radio production, so the artful, almost poetic stream of words formulating the ghost story is beautifully enhanced by Carpenter's aural and visual imagery. With this scene, *The Fog* begins quietly and calmly, with only the ticking of the pocket watch audible on the soundtrack, as a nice panning shot focuses on the faces of each of the scared children in turn. The absence of music, the monotonous sound of the ticking watch, and the frightened young faces immediately establish a mood of anticipation, of dread.

The eerie apricot light of the flames, Houseman's old visage in close-up and the ensuing reaction shots of the audience as the children recognize that they are perched at a campfire and therefore in danger, add much to the effectiveness of this opening. But first and foremost are those words written so beautifully by Carpenter and his partner, Debra Hill. Everything comes back to those frightening, atmosphere-

laden words as *The Fog*'s Mr. Machen takes his audience (and, again, the movie audience) to the world of April 21, 1880.

In the best tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, the ghost story ends tragically and with a warning to future generations that the evil is not really gone, not truly dead. To buttress this punchline, Carpenter's camera tilts up and up, away from Mr. Machen's solemn face, until it is facing a distant landscape: a dark blue shore with rolling waves crashing against the lonely surf. Carpenter makes the connection between ghost story and reality obvious and yet artful: first from Mr. Machen's mouth, and then to a panorama of the sea, where the tragedy occurred, terror shall begin.

The Fog's obsession with orally transmitted ghost stories does not end with this stylish opening sequence, and that's why one can view this element of the film as its leitmotif. Midway through the story, Father Malone (Hal Holbrook) passes on another version of the same haunting tale, this time to a skeptical Sandy (Nancy Loomis) and Mrs. Williams (Janet Leigh). Again the horror of the situation is wrought with a story, with an oral recitation of a tale about the sudden, violent and planned deaths of the *Elizabeth Dane* crew. In this case, the audience is already familiar with the general story, but this repetition is a necessity. For these stories to be recalled and reiterated through future generations, they must be repeated. So the repetition not only assures the survival of the story; for *The Fog* it also uncovers further evidence of the wrongs committed by specific town elders, the six co-conspirators. As Blake's vengeance is tied to the acts of this dirty half-dozen, these specifics provide further exposition.

A third, and perhaps the most chilling ghost story comes from protagonist Nick Castle (Tom Atkins), who shares with Elizabeth Solley (Jamie Lee Curtis) an encounter that his father—another member of the older generation—once had aboard another ghost ship at sea. This last story is a bow to another necessity of the form: It must be universal. In this case, the encounter with a ghost ship and a disappearing Spanish coin minted in 1867 reminds viewers that the *Elizabeth Dane* is not the only (ghost) ship in the ocean. Nick's story attempts to extend the terror of *The Fog* by suggesting that ships at sea disappear frequently under mysterious circumstances. In other words, the ocean is a realm of fear and the unknown, and we should respect and fear it.

The final ghost story is *The Fog*'s most important, as it represents the passing of the torch from Machen's generation to the next (Stevie Wayne). It also signifies her acceptance into the community, her

recitation and acceptance of this folklore. She is now a “true” member of the Antonio Bay society, having suffered for its crimes, and thus she is entitled to broadcast the story as she does from her perch on the lighthouse radio station. In this version of the ghost story, Stevie brings together all the important aspects of the earlier stories.

I don’t know what happened to Antonio Bay tonight. Something came out of the fog and tried to destroy us.... If this has been anything but a nightmare, and if we don’t find ourselves safe in our beds, it could come again. To the ships at sea who can hear my voice: Look across the water into the darkness. Look for the fog.

Notice how all the important elements of the ghost story, noted in Mr. Machen’s story, appear again. There’s the sense of repetition (in particular, of the word “look”), a shifting of the story in time, from the present (“tonight”) to the future, replete with a warning: “Look for the fog.” The cycle is complete, the story has been passed on.

Stevie Wayne’s version of the *Elizabeth Dane* Story not only recounts the new ending (the ghosts came back for vengeance), it highlights the importance of the Edgar Allan Poe quote that precedes the film and ties *The Fog* to the world of dreams and nightmares. “Is all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?” the opening card asks. And the distance between ghost story and nightmare is bridged.

Stevie’s final warning, “Look for the fog,” is a parallel to the famous line, “Keep watching the skies!,” the tag of *The Thing from Another World* (1951). In that film, Carpenter’s hero and directorial prototype, Howard Hawks, hoped to leave audiences chilled by sending them out of the theater with a dire warning: Outer space is a realm of mystery and we must remain forever vigilant. Likewise, *The Fog* culminates with a warning that the sea is a realm of terror and mystery and that we must always be conscious of the evil at its murky bottom. Whether the arena of danger be outer space or the deep blue sea, the effect is identical: Audiences depart the darkened auditorium after the film “forewarned” by the ghost story; wondering about all the dangers in man’s world.

Few horror movies can legitimately be termed poetic, but *The Fog* certainly qualifies. Aside from the artful use of the ghost story to generate terror, the film is enriched by beautiful imagery throughout, even in the most terrifying and horrible of moments. *The Fog* is filled with picturesque landscapes and vistas. From the rolling blue ocean, to the peaks around the isolated lighthouse, the film is shot in the

most beautiful and vibrant locations imaginable.

However, what is truly unique about *The Fog* is the manner in which the scare sequences are rendered beautiful. For instance, the *Sea Grass* interior is shot entirely in red light, with reflections from the sea outside dancing on the actors' faces. It's a view from Hell's gate, perhaps, but it is unusually gorgeous. It is not realistic but it seems appropriate since the denizens of the craft will soon find themselves in contact with hellish forces.

Likewise, when the ghosts besiege on Father Malone's church during the film's climax, their ragged hands burst forward with great momentum through lovely, stained glass windows. The moment is filled with horror and fear, but staged with an artist's eye for detail and composition. The grasping hands represent Hell's attempt to break through a sanctuary, a godly one.

Most beautiful of all, however, is the threat of the fog itself. The fog glows, it pulsates, moves, thins and thickens, and remains eerily luminescent throughout the film. In one spectacular shot (one probably run in reverse), a thick fog bank whips up suddenly and forms only inches in front of Nick's pick-up truck. As it sweeps through the idyllic Antonio Bay community, one cannot help being reminded of *The Blob* (1958). The fog is a village-devouring entity, sweeping across Everytown U.S.A. filled with an insatiable appetite for vengeance. Yet the fog is ever so much more elegant and lovely than a ball of protoplasm. A great nemesis, the fog can hide things in its breadth, can envelop people, can speed or slow down, even creep under doors or roll willy nilly across a beach. It is a versatile threat, and one deployed perfectly in this film.

For all its lyricism, beauty and thematic consistency (seen in the leitmotif of the ghost story), *The Fog* also works splendidly on another front. In keeping with Carpenter's avowed negative perception of America's rampant capitalism (also on display in 1988's, *They Live*), *The Fog* tells a story of moral cowardice, avarice and betrayal. In essence, the story concerns the underside of the American dream. Antonio Bay was built on the blood and stolen fortune of Blake and his crew. Yet for a century, Antonio Bay thrived because its developers had cast themselves as "winners" and the lepers as "losers." Worse than that, their descendants celebrate the conspirators for winning, even holding an extravagant celebration in their honor.

The current inhabitants of Antonio Bay are also rather selfish, euphemistically describing the wreck of the *Elizabeth Dane* as the

“catalyst that brought wonderful people together.” Ironically, Mrs. Williams refers to the co-conspirators as “heroes” despite her knowledge that they are actually murderers. In her speech, she declares, “We must keep their kind of spirit alive!” Of course, Blake has his vengeance, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children, but this idea of celebrating villains as heroes is clearly one that had currency in the 1980s, given the popularity of Oliver North (who lied to Congress) and the “corporate raiders” like Ivan Boesky who were once lauded as “masters of the world.”

Casting aside its value as a critic of the “greed is good” Reagan decade, another reason to laud *The Fog* is purely and simply that it’s a scary film. It delivers the goods and comes through with the jolts that cause viewers to leap out of their seats or spill their popcorn.

In *The Fog*, one particular suspense scene stands out. Andy is trapped in his house and Nick must rescue him as the fog rolls in from the ocean. As the scene builds, Nick breaks a window in Andy’s room and frees the boy, just as Blake’s avengers burst in. Nick gets Andy to the truck, but then—of course—it won’t start. The sequence builds to a fever pitch as the ghosts approach the truck, only inches away from the vehicle’s headlights. And still it won’t start...

And that’s just one terrifying moment in a thoughtful and literate horror movie. *The Fog* has a dozen edgy, anxiety-provoking moments just like that one, all guaranteed to scare you right out of your seat.

LEGACY: *The Fog* was remade in 2005 by director Rupert Wainright (and producers Debra Hill and John Carpenter). The new film starred Tom Welling and Maggie Grace and expanded on the history of the *Elizabeth Dane* by showing flashbacks of the sinking (here caused by a fire). The film opened October 14, 2005 and captured the number one slot at the box office, though reviews were scathing.

Friday the 13th

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“...almost unbearably scary...”—Rob Edelman, *Films in Review*, April 1980, page 246.

“An unabashed swipe of the precedent-setting *Halloween* (1977), this crudely produced but suspenseful low-budgeter made movie history

by becoming the first proto-splatter film to be released by a major Hollywood studio ... there's never a dull moment."—Gene Wright, *The Horrorshows: The A-To-Z of Horror in Film, TV, Radio and Theater*, Facts on File, 1986, pages 11–12.

"[D]istinctly one of the worst of the type.... The murderer and motive are pulled out of the air at the end. The performances, dialogue and general production standards keep fairly in step with this dim plotting."—David Robinson, *The Times*, Friday, June 13, 1980, page 11.

"Who knew this film would spawn what is probably the most crass series in horror film history? This was your friendly neighborhood slasher film, cut from the *Halloween* mold, and its entire *modus operandi* was to get your adrenaline flowing for the final act. It succeeds, but how many people remember that at least according to this film, the Jason character wasn't even alive, and was only shown in a nightmare? For anyone who's been to summer camp, or even just spent a fair amount of time in the woods, there's something to trigger the viewer's empathy throughout this film. But the clichés born here are what you remember. Most importantly is creative corpse arrangement. *Halloween* had a moment of creative corpse arrangement, when Laurie Strode finds her dead friends, but the *Friday the 13th* series turned it into an art form, while at the same time creating stereotypical characters that often had you rooting for the killer. It was all born here, but it would become what we truly know it to be in its second outing..."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

"This movie was a fairly fresh take on the blade-babe genre. It's as morally uptight as you might expect from the 1980s, firmly following the rule that those who engage in fornication shall die. Having a lake at the camp was a stroke of genius, allowing for much nubile and dripping flesh."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Betsy Palmer (Miss Voorhees); Adrienne King (Alice); Jeannine Taylor (Marcie); Robbi Morgan (Annie); Kevin Bacon (Jack); Harry Crosby (Bill); Laurie Bartram (Brenda); Mark Nelson (Ned); Peter Brouwer (Steve Christy); Rex Everhart (Truck Driver); Ronn Carroll (Sgt. Tierney); Ron Millkie (Office Dorf); Walt Gorney (Crazy Ralph); Willie Adams (Barry); Debra S. Hayes (Claudette); Dorothy Kobs (Trudy); Sally Ann Golden (Sandy); Mary Rocco (Operator); Ken L. Parker (Doctor); Ari Lehman (Jason).

CREW: A Sean S. Cunningham film. *Director of Photography:* Barry Abrams. *Art Director:* Virginia Field. *Executive Producer:* Alvin Geiler. *Casting:* TNI Casting, Julie Hughes, Barry Moss. *Special Makeup Effects:* Tom Savini. *Assisted by:* Taso Stavrakis. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Film Editor:* Bill Freda. *Associate Producer:* Stephen Miner. *Written by:* Victor Miller. *Produced and Directed by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Camp Crystal Lake is cursed. A boy named Jason (Lehman) drowned there in 1957 because of counselor negligence. A year later, two camp counselors were mysteriously murdered by an unknown assailant, and in 1962—when the camp was scheduled to be re-opened—the water “was bad.”

Now, after a \$25,000 investment, entrepreneur Steve Christy (Brouwer) is finally re-opening “Camp Blood” with the help of young counselors Alice (King), Bill (Crosby), Ned (Nelson), Jack (Bacon), Brenda (Bartram) and Marcie (Taylor). But a killer is intent on spoiling the grand re-opening, and inauguates the horror by slitting the throat of the camp’s new cook, Annie (Morgan).

As a storm hits Camp Crystal Lake by night and the power goes off, the shadowy killer moves in and terminates the camp counselors, one at a time. The last survivor, Alice, seeks help from a visitor in the night, Mrs. Voorhees (Palmer), the camp’s former cook...

COMMENTARY: Today, some elements of *Friday the 13th*’s DNA feel so ingrained in the genre that they’re difficult to take seriously. Such elements have been parodied and repeated, *ad infinitum*. Harry Manfredini’s brilliant and widely recognized “chi-chi-ha-ha” score, for one. But the dumb young counselors, the illicit sexual activity, the weed smoking, the Ten Little Indians–style plotting ... it’s all material that’s literally been broached dozens of times since this film popularized the slasher paradigm to an unprecedented degree.

The imitations and satire have unwittingly served a single, unified purpose. They’ve retroactively injured the general audience’s perception of the original *Friday the 13th*. Truth be told, this protean installment of the slasher saga remains a pretty solidly made and frightening example of a vintage 1980s horror film.

For instance, how many people recall that the movie actually does a credible job of establishing a picturesque locale in its first scenes after the credits? When I screened the film, I was surprised to see the quiet, idyllic scenes involving a beautiful, green America. There’s a shot of a

babbling brook, and of the historic architecture in a small town. A back packer named Annie (soon to be killed) rambles through this burg, and there's even a dog running about, for goodness sake. The impression is of a timeless, quiet, even quaint American countryside. But critics never talk about these moments, do they? They serve as a lovely counterpoint to the violence dwelling in the woods, just out of sight.



This teenager (actor unidentified) gets the point. A bloody *coup de grâce* in *Friday the 13th* (1980).

Later, the film leaves the camp locale again for a scene in a diner with

Steve. There's a nice waitress there named Sandy, and they share a not-particularly earth-shattering conversation. Yet this scene also establishes a genuine sense of place and time. The later entries in the popular series eschew these attempts to create a cinematic sense of community and location.

Today, viewers also recognize the various characters in the film. The practical joker, the stoner, the virgin, the jock and their ilk are stock creations, stereotypes from a hundred slasher films. Yet the cast in *Friday the 13th* (including Kevin Bacon) is actually pretty good. Many of the actors navigate numerous scenes in which they emote directly to the camera rather than each other (in other words, to a character off-screen that the audience can't see). That these scenes play as believable, and even frightening to a degree, is a testimony to the skill of the film's young stars. The slasher paradigm (evolved, to a certain degree, from the savage cinema) depends on a naturalistic rather than theatrical approach, and *Friday the 13th* is no exception. But again, it's easier as critics to laugh at the technique of the P.O.V. shot, or deride the cast as an interchangeable group of teens, than actually acknowledge that all these components help to form a potent horror tapestry.

It's important to note too that the movie makers don't actively hate these kids. That isn't always true in slasher films; not even in the *Friday the 13th* series, but it's certainly so here. The counselors carry a certain goofy and innocent charm, and audiences certainly empathize with the final girl, Alice.

Stylistically, much has been made by critics and scholars of the fact that many of the killings metaphorically put the audience in the position of "killer" by featuring the subjective shot. It's true that this technique is utilized in the film, but the first-person P.O.V. is *also* deployed throughout the film to serve as the eyes of other characters, red herrings, in an effort to throw off audiences about the identity of the real killer. So after a fashion, one might read the film style as simply a trick to foster suspense rather than as a concerted attempt to debauch a moviegoing audience.

More genuinely revolutionary about *Friday the 13th*, and something that few historians have written about, is the manner by which the victims tend to be isolated in the shots, often in a frame-within-a-frame-style composition. An example of this blocking occurs when Marcy goes to the bathroom, sitting on the toilet, barefoot. While she's there, the film cuts to several exterior long shots.

Despite the location of the camera outdoors, the audience sees clearly the interiors of the buildings (through the window). The interiors are clearly lit, and that's where the characters stand. Interestingly, the window box creates one frame within the composition. Then, all around the window box is the frame of the shot itself, mostly darkness, nighttime.

Thus, the entrapped characters, such as Marcy—or later Brenda—are visually limited to a perilously small percentage of the film's widescreen frame. They stand isolated and captured inside a box within a box ... a visual metaphor for being "caged." This staging is a highly original and successful alternative to tight framing. Here, the framing is still wide, but the characters still feel cut off and endangered; visually boxed-in.

These exterior shots (gazing through a window to a character inside a room) also provides the necessary feelings of voyeurism and peeping. As the characters go through their paces, they are unknowingly observed by the off-screen killer, and again, this is a fresh way of staging such a sequence. Not just a P.O.V., but squares-within-squares, each one limiting off more of the frame to the imperiled counselors.

Friday the 13th remains part and parcel of the "smoke and mirrors" 1980s, because the film wallows in bad behavior, but then—through the murders—punishes those who engage in it. Like the Reagan administration that wanted to shrink government but enlarged it and wanted to reduce the tax burden but did the opposite, the film appeals to the prurient interest, and then punishes the characters who engage in them.

The "vice-leads-to-slice-and-dice" approach of the slasher milieu is never better represented, perhaps, than in the original *Friday the 13th*. Bacon's character, Jack, reclines on a bunk and lights up a joint one moment, and in the next instant, a spear pushes up through the mattress and the back of his throat, where it protrudes. Blood gushes. It's gory, and all that marijuana smoke doesn't get the chance to reach his lungs. And I hasten to add, this murder also follows a sex scene.

Sexual activity also precedes death in the opening teaser, set in 1958, when the killer exacts bloody revenge on all "counselor-dom" for the death of young Jason. Again, the explicit connection is made between bad teenage behavior, and punishment.

By reinforcing this message again and again, *Friday the 13th*, like so many of the slasher films, is actually a steadfastly conservative piece

of work, reinforcing cultural mores about drug use, pre-marital sex, and the like. Ironically, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority never understood this and couldn't see past the violence to the film's message.

In keeping with the slasher paradigm, *Friday the 13th* bears an efficacious organizing principle, in this case a summer camp and nearby lake. Thus bunk beds, bathing suits, boating, archery, teenage boys and girl are all well within the film's purview. The film also provides a likable final girl in Alice, and follows her through the tour of the dead, wherein she discovers her dead friends, and finally, the *coup de grâce*, in this case, a decapitation. The film also has a few other touches familiar to fans of the paradigm, particularly the old man, where named Ralph, who constantly warns the teens, "You're doomed if you stay!" There's also, notably, the breast reveal, a red herring (Steve, the only other adult at camp; and Ralph, himself), and even a practical joker.

Today, the vast majority of these elements are enshrined in the slasher hall of fame. Ultimately, however, fans don't love *Friday the 13th* because it fits an intellectual paradigm, nor because the framing is clever, or even because they buy into the message that vice precedes slice-and-dice. No, the true reason for *Friday the 13th*'s success—and this is often glossed over—is that the film is genuinely scary.

The last fifteen minutes aspire to—and reach—an apex of tension, suspense and shocks. The final chase is wild, frenetic and anxiety-provoking. The tour of the dead provides jolts. And the slow-motion decapitation of the killer with a machete is a high-watermark in slasher history, as is the sting in the tail/tale which finds a deformed Jason-child leaping from the lake into Alice's boat. Probably the only better sting in the tale/tail came in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), and involved a hand reaching out from the grave for Amy Irving.

In some important ways, *Friday the 13th* is probably best watched separate and apart from the rest of the series. The film doesn't really concern Jason, the masked killer, and even functions as a murder mystery rather than simply a slasher film. Years of sequels have reflected badly on the original *Friday the 13th*, which upon a fair viewing is a skillful, well-crafted horror show, second, perhaps, only to *Halloween* in this subgenre.

LEGACY: *Friday the 13th* was the surprise, runaway hit of the summer of 1980, and spawned no less than seven sequels in the 1980s, culminating with *Jason Takes Manhattan* in 1989. A TV series

(concerning a haunted antique shop, not a machete-wielding psychopath) appeared in the fall of 1987 and ran for three successful seasons in syndication. In the 1990s, *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* continued the horrors, and in the 21st century, *Jason X* (about Jason Voorhees in outer space!) and *Freddy vs. Jason* (2004) have furthered the tale of Camp Blood's famous hockey-masked killer.

Following up the success of *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* cemented Hollywood's belief that a holiday or event-centric slasher film, one produced inexpensively, could make a killing at the box office, and consequently the slasher floodgates opened.

He Knows You're Alone

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The movie has some ambition to be more than the slasher films it was released amidst, as signaled by the opening scene set in a cinema wherein two girls watch a slasher film, and one of them is actually killed. This self-reflexivity signals an interest in the voyeuristic dynamics of the form, as does the killer's sexual violence, but the film fails to self-consciously examine the device it uses."—Robert Cettl, *Serial Killer Cinema: An Analytical Filmography*, McFarland, 2003, page 201.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Don Scardino (Marvin); Caitlin O'Heaney (Amy Jensen); Elizabeth Kemp (Nancy); Lewis Arlt (Detective Len Gamble); Patsy Pease (Joyce); James Rebhorn (Professor/Carl); Tom Hanks (Elliott); Dana Barron (Diana); Tom Rolfig (Killer); Joseph Leone (Ralph the Tailor); Paul Gleason (Daley); James Carroll (Phil); Brian Byers (Bernie); Curtis Hostetter (Tommy); Robin Lamont (Ruthie) Robin Tilchman (Marie); Peter Geneny (Thompson); John Bottoms (Father McKenna).

CREW: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer Presents A Lansbury/Beruh Production. **Music:** Alexander Peskanov, Mark Peskanov. **Film Editor:** George T. Norris. **Co-Producers:** Robert Di Milia, Nan Pearlman. **Executive Producers:** Edgar Lansbury, Joseph Beruh. **Director of Photography:** Gerald Feil. **Written by:** Scott Parker. **Producer:** George Manasse. **Directed by:** Armand Mastroianni. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Most people do, actually. I mean, like to be scared. It’s something primal, something basic. Horror movies and roller coasters and the house of horrors ride. You can face death without any real fear of dying. It’s safe. You can leave the movie or get off the ride with a vicarious thrill and feeling that you’ve just conquered death. It’s one hell of a first class rush.”—Elliott, played by a young Tom Hanks, makes an impassioned case for the social value of horror films in Armand Mastroianni’s *He Knows You’re Alone*.

SYNOPSIS: A psychopath (Rolfing) with a dark personal history is going around murdering brides-to-be, and has set his sights on the lovely Amy Jenson (O’Heaney). As for Amy, she’s having second thoughts about the upcoming nuptials, finding it hard to choose between her fiancé and the friend who so clearly loves her, Marvin (Scardino).

While a detective named Gamble (Arlt) puts the clues together about the identity of the killer, the lunatic continues his pursuit of Amy and murders her tailor (Leone). Then the killer moves on to Amy’s friends, killing them one at a time, until the only people who stand in his way are Marvin and Gamble. But even they can’t protect Amy from the madman with the knife...

COMMENTARY: Well, here you have your psychotic killer on the loose during a special event (preparations for a wedding) and your obsessed but ultimately useless authority figure—a police detective. You’ve got three pretty girlfriends unaware of the danger they’re facing, and a boatload of young adult hanky panky (sex and weed). Then comes a final *coup de grâce* and the ensuing last chase, one not to be missed ... followed by the inevitable sting in the tail/tale.

Quick, which horror movie am I writing about?

It could be *Halloween*, of course, the landmark slasher movie that set the trend on fire for the 1980s. It could be about a dozen other movies of 1980s vintage too. But it’s actually *He Knows You’re Alone*, a scary and technically accomplished slasher film.

Taking it from the top of our favorite ’80s paradigm, *He Knows You’re Alone* features a crime in the past (a man jilted at the altar by his bride-to-be becomes a bride-hating maniac), and pits the killer against a resourceful final girl, Amy (O’Heaney).

More resourceful than her doomed friends, Amy survives the killer’s onslaught, though still has a difficult time figuring out the identity of

the killer, which necessitates the presence of a red herring (namely James Rebhorn's horny professor).

In some notable cases (as with the professor and his mistress), the vice of adulterous sex precedes the vicious slice-and-dice. And along the way there are also several P.O.V. stalker shots, and even a shower sequence.

Finally, a *coup de grâce* (a decapitated head floating in a fish aquarium) precedes the sting in the tale/tail, which comes out of left field here. Though the killer is eventually dispatched (unlike Michael Myers, for example), Amy has decided to marry her best friend, Marvin, rather than her fiancé. This causes her original boyfriend to go nuts and attack Amy, thus renewing the cycle of violence against brides.

It doesn't sound terribly original, does it?

To make matters worse, *He Knows You're Alone* boasts a *Halloween* sound-alike score and even audaciously repeats one of the Carpenter film's most famous compositions. In the conclusion of *Halloween*, a battered and dazed Jamie Lee Curtis stood up in a doorway at the Doyle house, believing the Shape to be dead at last. Behind her, in a blurred background, Myers suddenly bolted up, and began to approach her ... slowly.

That's not only a *Halloween* signature shot, it's one of the five or six best compositions in horror movie history. It's that good; that skilled. And maybe that's why *He Knows You're Alone* blatantly steals it, featuring an image of the killer slowly ascending in the background behind Amy.

He Knows You're Alone also imitates the Dr. Loomis character with its own variation, Detective Gamble; both are “men obsessed,” and both don't really stop their nemeses.

This movie repeats the *Halloween* dynamic of a slow-walking villain who—no matter what—won't accelerate his pace ... and yet somehow always manages to catch up with a heroine running full steam.

So, yeah, this movie's roots are showing. This is *Halloween* redux, and yet there's something modestly compelling about it.

One of the best scenes in *He Knows You're Alone* comes at the beginning, as we realize we're watching a horror movie within a horror movie, and that a would-be victim of the film's psycho is at a movie theater attending a showing of a horror flick. What's so funny about this is that the “fake” movie being shown in *He Knows You're Alone* is a crappy slasher flick too. The frame focuses on young lovers making out in a car as they're stalked from outside.

This movie-within-a-movie scene features all the tricks audiences have come to expect in a low-budget slasher film, from the P.O.V. stalk shot and the teen boy's bravado to the girl's escalating fear and desperation as her beau goes out into the night to check on a “strange sound.” Of course, the heroine begins talking to herself, increasingly nervous, and eventually goes looking for her boyfriend. The musical score is replete with zappy “stings” to scare us, and an unsteady camera keeps us on edge.

But then a character watching all this unfold on screen can't take the stress of it anymore, and heads to the rest room. Where, naturally, she promptly encounters a real psycho-killer, not unlike the one in the faux horror film *He Knows You're Alone* was just ribbing. This is a self-reflexive touch, one that alerts audiences immediately that the makers of the film are telling a joke. They've seen this all before too.

But that doesn't mean they can't surprise us...

This opening movie-within-a-movie scene is so effective that it was repeated in *Scream 2* (1997), with Jada Pinkett as the squeamish

moviegoer looking away from a horror movie and heading to the rest room for a reprieve. No doubt that sequence was really “an homage.” Indeed, *He Knows You’re Alone* is homage-worthy, because it was attempting an alchemy not achieved until *Scream* (1996) and its sequels. To wit: the behind-the-scenes talents at play have a joy and knowledge about horror films and what they’re trying to achieve, and that joy comes across in the film’s tricks and treats.

He Knows You’re Alone is aware of its “movie-ness,” if that term makes sense. The incantation featured above the synopsis, a long string of dialogue read by a young Tom Hanks, extends the fun of the movie inside a movie prologue. Hanks’ character, Elliott, discusses at length why horror movies are fun; why they’re exhilarating, and why—despite the better judgment of many viewers—they work so well and are actually valuable, even cathartic. Taken in tandem, the clever opening scene and Hanks’ monologue (delivered at an amusement park, no less) reveal a simple directive. The movie wants to scare us, pure and simple. And not in an ugly way. But in a fun, therapeutic one.

Director Mastroianni achieves that goal by staging scary moments, and composing clever, devious shots. Along the way, he builds a modicum of suspense through his conscientious tweaking of those old familiar elements of the slasher paradigm.

For instance, the “I’ll be right back” routine gets a real workout in *He Knows You’re Alone*. Only here, characters keep leaving behind convenient, elaborate excuses so they won’t be missed and the other characters in the play won’t realize they’ve been killed.

“Don’t worry if you don’t see me until Sunday,” says one such would-be victim, effectively making her death invisible to her friends. And that just keeps happening.

One could make the argument that this kind of dialogue is actually just weak plotting. But given the movie-within-a-movie opening and the monologue by Hanks about the joy of being scared, it’s not hard to read this stuff as a wink and a nudge from the filmmakers. They’re having fun scaring us; and as a result, the movie is fun.

Mastroianni is also canny about the way he reveals important information in quick, almost off-handed non-verbal style. There’s a juncture in the film where a knife “disappears” between shots in the kitchen, an unacknowledged indication that the killer has arrived and selected his weapon. There’s no notice paid to this, no close-up, no

thumping music. It's just a detail to be observed, and it's nicely done.

The moment in the funhouse wherein Amy experiences a "flash" vision of the psychotic killer amongst the other expected scares also forecasts Tobe Hooper's *The Funhouse* (1981), and more explicitly, ties in with the roller-coaster, self-reflexive nature of the film.

To its credit, that's precisely what *He Knows You're Alone* feels like: a good roller-coaster ride. The film's final chase is scary and tense, and a palpable sense of relief comes after the climax.

After it's over, you'll want to get in line and start all over again...

The Hearse

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Trish Van Devere (Jane Hardy); Joseph Cotten (Walter Prichard); David Gautreaux (Tom Sullivan); Donald Hotton (Reverend Winston); Med Flory (Sheriff Denton); Donald Petrie (Luke); Christopher McDonald (Pete); Perry Long (Paul Gordon); Fredric Franklyn (Mr. Gordon); Olive Dunbar (Mrs. Gordon); Al Hansen (Bo Rehnquist); Dominic Barto (The Driver); Nicholas Shield (Dr. Greenwalt); Chuck Mitchell (Counterman); Allison Balson (Alice).

CREW: Crown International Pictures Presents a Marmark Production. *Written by:* Bill Bleich. *Based on an idea by:* Mark Tenser. *Director of Photography:* Mori Kawa. *Film Editor:* George Berndt. *Music:* Webster Lewis. *Line Producer:* Charles Russell. *Executive Producer:* Newton P. Jacobs. *Produced by:* Mark Tenser. *Directed by:* George Bowers. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I know what your aunt did here ... she worshiped the Devil!"—an accusation from a local (Joseph Cotten) in *The Hearse*.

SYNOPSIS: After a painful and emotional divorce in San Francisco, Jane Hardy (Van Devere) returns to her hometown, Blackford, for the summer. On her way to move into her dead aunt's old home, a sinister hearse sideswipes Jane's car.

The town locals—especially attorney Walter Prichard (Cotten)—are distinctly unfriendly, doors in her new home slam on their own, power fluctuates at random, a music box seems to move from night-

stand to dresser overnight, pipes rattle in the basement, and Jane learns from her aunt's diary that the aunt fell in love with a man who wanted her to make an immortality pact with Satan!

Soon, Jane has more run-ins with the hearse on an old county road, as well as its ghastly, spectral driver (Barto). Suddenly the horror stops when she meets handsome Tom Sullivan (Gautreaux), a local man intent on romancing her. When Tom doesn't show up for dinner one night, Jane sets out to find why and discovers a lonely grave on the Sullivan estate. And then the hearse returns...

COMMENTARY: In *The Hearse*, Jane Hardy mentions in passing that she lives at the old Martin Place. She does so in the presence of several horses, and the cagey animals start to whinny and neigh with discontent and fear.



Will they be lovers? Jane (Van Devere) romances a mysterious old-fashioned stranger, Tom Sullivan (David Gautreaux), in *The Hearse*.

Word to the wise: You know your house is haunted when even horses see fit to comment on it...

And that's an essential problem with the haunted house subgenre. As a rule, dense characters remain in peril far too long, instead of simply fleeing the premises when bad things start to occur. A pricey mortgage? Furniture left behind? Suitcases not packed? None of that is particularly important when doors slam of their own volition, pipes rattle without explanation, music boxes begin to play in the black of night and the like.

Although *The Hearse* suffers from this problem, logistical concerns aren't its most significant drawback. Rather—at a running time of one hundred minutes—the film treads into long spells of dullness. Atmosphere builds strongly for the first hour, but then just dissipates. Incidents (like encounters on a dark road between the Satanic hearse and other cars) repeat and eventually lose their impact, despite the efforts of Webster Lewis's overwrought soundtrack.

The Hearse feels like a rather old-fashioned supernatural story, and one that would have been more at home in the 1970s (the era of *Brotherhood of Satan* [1972] or *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* [1973]). Like the former, it exists in the world of hazy black masses and Satanic rituals, and like the latter, it involves a female protagonist who comes to question her own sanity and is hampered by unfriendly locals. Yet, both of those films represent more satisfying, and more chilling viewing.

Give *The Hearse* its due: The film often attempts (and fails) to generate scares through good time-tested cinematic means. There's a taste of the Gothic here with Trish Van Devere cavorting about in a diaphanous white gown and romancing a “two-faced” man (like Dorian Gray), one who is romantic and alluring, but also evil and repulsive. The film also features your garden-variety, gauzy “is-it-a-dream-or-not?” sequence. So truly, *The Hearse* feels more spooky than genuinely scary, and it's more moody than gory. The film depends on atmosphere rather than special effects, and, of course, that's a good thing. But unlike another Van Devere film of 1980, *The Changeling*, *The Hearse* just doesn't achieve any kind of real frisson. Instead, the disengaged viewer is tempted merely to count the number of times Jane runs off to her car and speeds away somewhere (so she can be menaced by ... the hearse!).



TH-1

Sheriff Denton (Med Flory) doesn't believe Jane's (Van Devere) wild tale about an evil car and a haunted house.

Director George Bowers has a difficult time sustaining the mood of terror in his low-budget film. Truth be told, far more effective horror imagery involving a hearse can be found in the hair-raising 1976 Dan Curtis film, *Burnt Offerings*.

The Hearse isn't terrible, but right off the bat there are four other movies *The Hearse* evokes—*Let's Scare Jessica to Death*, *Brotherhood of Satan*, *The Changeling* and *Burnt Offerings*—and each would represent a better selection for your Netflix queue.

Home Sweet Home
no stars

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jake Steinfeld (Killer); Vanessa Shaw (Angel); Peter De Paula (Mistake); Don Edmonds (Bradley); Charles Hoyes (Wayne); David Mielke (Scott); Leia Hardin (Gail); Lisa Rodriguez (Maria); Colette

Trygg (Jennifer); Sallee Young (Linda); J. Kelly (Cop #1); R. Fouts (Cop #2); Victor Paddock (First Victim); Rochelle Constanten (Old Woman); Anne Cribbs (Witness).

CREW: *Presented by*: Sandy Cobe. *Original Story and Screenplay by*: Thomas Bush. *Music*: Rich Tufo. *Editor*: Nettie Pena. *Executive Producers*: Rick Whitfield, Alex Rebar. *Producer-Stunt Coordinator*: Don Edmonds. *Special Effects*: Charlie Spurgeon. *Directed by*: Nettie Pena. *MPAA Rating*: Not available. *Running time*: 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A hulky serial killer named Jones (Steinfeld) escapes from a Los Angeles mental hospital and—hopped up on PCP—goes on a wild killing spree. He steals a station wagon, runs over a little old lady, and stashes the bloody vehicle near the Bradley ranch in the mountains. There, Bradley (Edmonds) and a group of friends, including his son Mistake (De Paula) and young daughter Angel (Shaw) prepare for a big Thanksgiving dinner.

But the killer, who wears a tattoo “home sweet home” on his fist, starts to kill Bradley’s family members and guests, one at a time, as they leave on typical holiday errands. He murders Bradley by crushing him under the hood of Bradley’s car, and later in the night electrocutes Mistake. Finally, only one adult, Jennifer (Trygg), remains alive to protect Angel, but they will have to survive a long night of terror...

COMMENTARY: Of the three hundred thirty or so films reviewed in this text, not a one of ‘em is worse or less enjoyable than *Home Sweet Home*. It’s tempting to opine that this film is a real “turkey,” given the Thanksgiving Day organizing principle of this cheaply made slasher flick. But honestly, even that term doesn’t get close to describing how rotten this film is. It’s truly fowl—er, foul.

Artless and dumb, *Home Sweet Home* opens with a prologue that features a muscular madman (played by *Body by Jake* star, Jake Steinfeld) injecting PCP into his tongue. Then he gets behind the wheel of his car and runs over an old lady at an intersection. Steinfeld appears wide-eyed and hysterical throughout the sequence (and the film), unable to suggest madness without cackling wildly or gesticulating like a madman.

If only he had a moustache to twirl...

Just when one imagines the film can’t possibly get worse, a mime playing an electric guitar shows up and steals the show. He’s the

practical joker stock character in this particular production. Adding insult to injury, he's one of the last victims to be killed (by electrocution), so audiences have to endure his wacky antics for a long, long time.

Believe me, you'll thirst for the mime's death when he begins performing magic tricks...

Home Sweet Home simultaneously epitomizes all the flaws, and none of the potential glories of the slasher paradigm. The death sequences aren't particularly memorable, let alone inventive. In one, the killer leaps onto the hood of the car and crushes Bradley while he's trying to jump his battery. In another, a character dies by falling against a rock. Literally.

Characters repeatedly isolate themselves, walk away to remote locations, evidence no sign of peril or insight, and then get killed in stupid fashion. And the dialogue is ... rich. Half of it doesn't even make sense. "She won't drink anything," one character tells another, "she hates to go to the bathroom."

My favorite line, however comes from a stupid cop, representing useless authority. "Did you see that chick with the big bazooms?," he asks his stupid partner.

Now that's class...

Home Sweet Home is so bad that the movie never satisfactorily explains if the film's murderous events are actually occurring on Thanksgiving. The film's VHS box art plays up the holiday angle, but the movie does not. From empirical evidence, I can conclude only that there is a turkey dinner in the movie, and that some friends have gathered to share it at a California ranch.

Therefore, it may be safe to conclude that the movie's events occur on Turkey Day. But I wouldn't be too certain of anything I see in *Home Sweet Home*.

Except that the movie stinks.

Humanoids from the Deep

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[S]hameless exploitation. It rips-off effects from other movies, it caters to rape fantasies, and it often dips into soft-core porn. As perversity would have it, these are its good points.... The final scene is an absolutely unnecessary and gratuitous theft from *Alien*. It’s terrific.”—Darrell Moore, *The Best, Worst and Most Unusual: Horror Films*, Publications International, Ltd., 1983, page 66.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Doug McClure (Jim Hill); Ann Turkel (Dr. Susan Drake); Vic Morrow (Hank Slattery); Cindy Weintraub (Carol Hill); Anthony Penya (Johnny Eagle); Denise Galik (Linda Beale); Lynn Theel (Peggy Larsen); Meegan King (Jerry Potter); Breck Costin (Tommy Hill); Hoke Howell (Deke Jensen); Don Maxwell (Dickie Moore); David Strassman (Billy); Greg Travis (Radio Announcer); Linda Shayne (Miss Salmon); Lisa Glaser (Becky); Bruce Monette (Jake Potter); Shawn Erler (Hill Baby); Frank Arnold (Old Man); Amy Barrett (Amy).

CREW: *Presented by:* New World Pictures. *Film Editor:* Mark Goldblatt. *Director of Photography:* Daniel La Cambre. *Music:* James Horner. *Co-Producer:* Hunt Lowry. *Screenplay:* Frederick James. *Story:* Frank Arnold, Martin B. Cohen. *Producer:* Martin B. Cohen. *Humanoids Created and Designed by:* Rob Bottin. *Special Effects Makeup Assistants:* Ken Myers, Shawn McEnroe, Steve Johnson. *Stunt Coordinator:* Jack Tyree. *Directed by:* Barbara Peeters. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

P.O.V.

“It wasn’t exactly a labor of love. There was lots of political maneuvering and power plays amongst people trying to get the director fired and take over. It was not a great experience. It was just a grinded-out kind of low-budget horror movie, but it was great working with Rob Bottin again. He did the creatures....”—Kent Beyda, assistant editor on *Humanoids from the Deep*.

SYNOPSIS: The small fishing town of Noyo prepares to host the seventy-fifth annual Salmon Festival as it anticipates the construction of Can Co.’s new cannery, which will be a great boost to the faltering local economy. Instead, the town gets unanticipated visitors when humanoid sea creatures with claws and giant craniums attack, killing all the dogs first. Then, the creatures begin murdering male sunbathers and campers, but rape their girlfriends, like unlucky but beautiful Peggy Larsen (Theel).

American Indian Johnny Eagle (Penya) and fisherman Jim Hill

(McClure) meet up with Can Co.'s Dr. Susan Drake (Turkel), a scientist who reveals that a corporate growth acceleration experiment with salmon DNA has gone wrong and may be responsible for the creation of these humanoids from the deep. They rescue an impregnated Peggy from the beasts and try to warn the town of the danger, but on the night of the Salmon Festival, the monsters crash the party, attacking the beauty pageant winner Miss Salmon (Shayne) and others.

The monsters are defeated in the bay, but Hill realizes that his wife Carol (Weintraub) and his baby son (Erler) face danger at their isolated mountain home, and races to help them. Later, Dr. Drake oversees Peggy's delivery and awaits the birth of her hybrid baby...

COMMENTARY: *Humanoids from the Deep* is a 1950s-60s-style horror movie featuring predatory monsters from the sea, not entirely unlike those sausage-mouthed cretins seen *The Horror of Party Beach* (1964). Yet this admittedly ludicrous material has been updated to incorporate the latest American politics, both economic and sexual. The movie is a solid exploitation film too, and often times it leaps right over the border of bad taste. The inevitable result of such taboo-breaking is that audiences become unsettled—uncertain where the movie's priorities and boundaries truly rest. And that uncertainty about what *might* be seen makes viewers susceptible to the movie's vicious will. It makes the movie feel scarier, perhaps, than it genuinely is.

Over the years, many have complained about *Humanoids from the Deep* because it features several scenes of grotesque inhuman creatures vigorously humping and impregnating nubile young women. These scenes are especially questionable, one supposes, because many seem to have been inserted into the film at random and don't really further the plot or otherwise improve its quality.

Indeed, the film's director is a woman, Barbara Peeters, and the attack sequences were reportedly included over her strenuous objections. That's why so many breasts just happen (yeah, right!) to get flashed right in front of the camera. That's sleazy business, no doubt, and this is definitely a sleazy movie. Yet even though *Humanoids from the Deep* puts the *exploit* back into exploitation, it's a good little genre film for a number of reasons.

Foremost among these is that *Humanoids from the Deep* boasts an economic backdrop that reveals something pertinent about the times the film was produced, particularly the Zeitgeist of early 1980. Jobs are drying up in the seaside community of Noyo, and the shrinking job market and its limited opportunities are augmenting prejudice and

racial backlash too, making the community vulnerable.

Before long, blue collar American fishermen face off against minorities and special interest groups, whom they perceive are trying to carve up the white man's good deal in America. American Indians, trial attorneys, and yes, rampaging sea monsters are all making modern life complicated for the average fisherman. If only Johnny Eagle, a Native American, would drop his lawsuit (he wants the land back for his people) so big business (represented by Can Co.) could come in and fix things with their new, improved, technologically efficient cannery and the like.

In 1980, feeling many of these same concerns in real life, blue-collar workers—many of them members of unions (like the Teamsters)—changed political party affiliation for the first time in a generation to vote as “Reagan Democrats.”

By and large, these were disaffected white men and women who longed for a simpler time, when they didn't have to deal with ethnic difficulties, legal regulatory bodies and the like. That was very much a part of Reagan's charm: his promise to free the American worker from a red-tape government that stifled business development.

In a very forward-thinking way, *Humanoids from the Deep* actually links the rampaging sea monsters with the corporate “savior” of the town, Can Co. As it turns out, there is a conspiracy brewing in Noyo, and the cannery company has altered the DNA of salmon to accelerate growth and improve business. This is sometimes the problem with deregulation. Free enterprise is great, but left to its own accord and unwatched, business tends to corruption. One need only look at companies like Enron or Worldcom to see that.

Humanoids from the Deep seems to understand that cycle, and in fact, the film concerns a double rape of Noyo. On the first hand, the company is raping nature to create both its new facilities and those pesky fish with accelerated growth. On the second hand, the outcome of that experiment—the monsters—are returning to Noyo and literally raping the townspeople. The people don't realize that the easy answer they seek in their lives, a return to simpler times and avoidance of complicated issues, involves handing over the town to shady characters who care most about the bottom line and their personal profits, not the well-being of the community.

Humanoids from the Deep is a drive-in movie pure and simple, so it is unwise to read too much depth into its narrative, especially given how

the text was corrupted to feature lots of tit shots and the like, but what one can state undeniably is that the town in the film is (a) populated by people who, short months after the film's release, would define themselves as Reagan Democrats, and (b) the film involves a conspiracy by a big corporation to make more money, one that ends up having a destructive impact on the community. Thus *Humanoids from the Deep* is representative of the decade's "don't worry/be afraid" duality. New jobs and opportunity are promised, female-raping fish monsters are delivered.

Humanoids from the Deep is sometimes funny, sometimes scary. The scene in which a mother and child are attacked in a secluded forest home is an example of the latter, and the final attack on the carnival is a good example of the former, a set piece gone terribly awry and lapsing into juvenile humor. James Horner's score is particularly memorable, and some of the gore is quite convincing. But *Humanoids* earns its reputation as disreputable with all the ridiculous, prominently featured nudity (some of which involves obvious body doubles). The final "sting in the tale/tail," however, is one you are not likely to soon forget.

Maniac

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"...without any redemption whatsoever..."—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1981, Calendar page.

"*Maniac* is one of a fairly large number of horror films in the 1980s that seriously flirts with becoming pornography for those with a violence fetish. It's interesting to see *Maniac*'s star Joe Spinell having come from *The Godfather* and *Rocky* into ... well, something different. With its *Psycho* undercurrent of maternal angst, *Maniac* is all about delivering gory deaths, pulled off nicely by Tom Savini, and one wonders what the filmmakers were really trying to do here. It's a nasty film, not entirely without merit, but it feels almost dirty to watch. Compare this film to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, which used some of the same ingredients, but achieved something much more laudable. *Maniac* gets off on its meanness, perhaps, where *Henry* knows what it's presenting is wrong, but respects the viewer enough to let us make our own judgment."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

“A lot has been written through the years about the disdain shared amongst horror fans over William Lustig’s *Maniac*. Even the film’s special effects creator, Tom Savini, has been openly vocal about his dissatisfaction with the finished product by calling the film “sleaze.” It’s all too bad, as *Maniac* is a shining example of what could be right about the fairly one dimensional slasher flick. The script, the direction, the lighting, the editing and the bloody set pieces all mesh perfectly together with the bigger-than-life on-screen power of the film’s star and resident murderer, Joe Spinell. In defense of the film’s doubters, *Maniac* does possess a heavy-handed and mean-spirited quality. But that quality coalesces seamlessly with the grisly gore to help create a claustrophobic air of honest-to-god fear and dread.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Joe Spinell (Frank Zito); Caroline Munro (Anna D’Antoni); Gail Lawrence (Rita); Kelly Piper (Nurse); Rita Montone (Hooker); Tom Savini (Disco Boy); Hyla Marrow (Disco Girl); James Brewster (Beach Boy); Tracie Evans (Street Hooker); Sharon Mitchell (Second Nurse); Carol Henry (Deadbeat); Nelia Batmeister (Carmen Zito); Louis Jawitz (Art Director); Denise Spagnuolo (Denise); Billy Spagnuolo (Billy); Frank Pesco (TV Reporter); Candace Clements (First Park Mother); Diane Spagnuolo (Second Park Mother); Kim Hudson (Lobby Hooker).

CREW: *Presented by:* Magnum Motion Pictures. *Associate Producer:* Joe Packard. *Special Makeup and Effects by:* Tom Savini. *Music:* Jay Chattaway. *Film Editor:* Lorenzo Marinelli. *Director of Photography:* Robert Lindsay. *Executive Producers:* Joe Spinell, Judd Hamilton. *Screenplay:* C.A. Rosenberg, Joe Spinell. *Produced by:* Andrew Garroni, William Lustig. *Directed by:* William Lustig. *MPAA Rating:* Unrated. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A fat, sweaty psychotic man named Frank (Spinell) dwells in a dark, cramped apartment with his mannequin collection and is driven by his peculiar form of madness to kill and scalp women, and then put their scalps upon his mannequins as wigs. He undertakes a killing spree in New York, blowing away a couple (Savini, Marrow) under the Verrazano Bridge with a shotgun, and then stabbing a beautiful nurse (Piper) in a subway station after a harrowing pursuit.

Before long, he is obsessing on a beautiful photographer, Anna (Munro), and attempts to date her. But his blind hatred of women—caused by his abusive mother—sees him act violently, killing her

model friend, Rita (Lawrence). When Frank visits his mother's grave with Anna, he can no longer restrain his murderous urges and attacks, but Anna puts up a fight. Finally, the wounded killer returns to his apartment and faces a most peculiar form of revenge...

COMMENTARY: This is a movie that positively oozes sleaze and despair, and that's a compliment. After a nightmare involving a bloody murder on a beach (and an ensuing "stay awake" shot), *Maniac* commences with a view of Joe Spinell as the tortured Frank Zito, lying in bed. At first, only his eyes are illuminated in the darkness. But we soon see he's unkempt, overweight and perspiring profusely. He lives in a dingy apartment filled with candles; melancholy music on the score suggests a horrible and lonely life as we watch this white, pasty man dress and depart.

Next, we're in Times Square by night, with hookers all about, beneath the glare of neon lights. The approach is nearly *cinema verite*, or direct cinema. The audience is there.

"I need one more trick to make my rent..." one hooker entices, before running over a litany of what she will do and for how much money.

Welcome to *Maniac*...

This is a movie about grim psychosis, about a man with a deep-seated hatred for women, stemming from a failed relationship with his mother. Reading that description—and seeing the violence in the film—one can understand why the knee jerk reaction to *Maniac* is to label it "misogynist," but frankly, that conclusion can't be backed up by any of the director's thoughtful choices and compositions in the movie. The film is *about* a misogynist, but that doesn't make the film misogynist. *Schindler's List* is about Nazi atrocities (and many are seen on camera) but that doesn't make it a film that approves of such things.

Of course, *Maniac* is no *Schindler's List*, but the principle is identical. This is an effective horror movie; and unlike many horror films of far greater popularity, it doesn't transform violence into humor for fun, or bloody special effects into a gory showcase. On the contrary, the violence in this film feels inescapably real ... and therefore quite terrible. If critics hate this movie, it's no doubt because it's powerfully realized ... it has an impact. *Maniac*'s not theatrical and over the top, but rather extremely naturalistic, so the audience feels as though it's real.

But—and this is an important point—the female victims are not portrayed in judgmental terms or even two-dimensionally, for that matter. Anna (Munro) is clearly a lovely and open person. She tolerates Frank and even considers dating him, revealing that she isn't shallow, but willing to look beyond physical failings to a person's "inner beauty." Unlike the women attacked by inbred ingrates in the really insulting *Mother's Day*, by contrast, none of the women in this film are portrayed as castrating bitches. The movie never adopts the viewpoint of Zito. It never validates his crazy rambling as anything other than mad.

That's critical to understanding the picture. There are several point of view subjective shots in *Maniac*, but importantly, not one of them comes from Zito's perspective during the kills.

On the contrary, the film asks the audience to identify with the victims, not the killers, through the use of this familiar horror movie technique. When Zito checks into a motel with a hooker and starts to strangle her, the camera adopts *her* perspective, not his. Therefore, reading film grammar, the camera is strangling *us*. We aren't vicariously "killing" the hooker through Zito's eyes; we're sympathizing with the victim, experiencing her last tragic seconds of life. True, there's an over-the-shoulder shot of the killer's hands on the hooker, but that's quite different from the P.O.V. subjective shot, which some critics believe can make audiences complicit with the lunatic.

And lunatic is the right word. There's one sense in which you can view *Maniac* and understand it's a film as simple and traditional as *The Wolf Man*. It's a monster movie. Zito is very much like a werewolf, only instead of suffering from lycanthropy, his disease is mental degradation. One senses that he wants to stop the killings, but is unable to suppress the homicidal force within him. Thus, he is just as much a victim of circumstance as a werewolf or any other such monster. We pity the werewolf, so why don't people pity Zito? This film isn't supernatural, and I suspect that's why so many critics found it without redemption.

One thing is for certain, the violence in this film is realistic, horrifying ... but never leering. The disgusting shotgun death involving Tom Savini and his girlfriend in the car is utterly revolting, but it passes quickly. Similarly, the sex is kept relatively restrained. During a shower scene, a woman's breasts are only seen briefly, another example of the director backing away from the leer. The approach is always responsible, and more than that, three-dimensional.

At the heart of *Maniac* is Joe Spinell's performance as Zito, and this actor is better the more he gets to speak and develop the character in relation to others. The dinner sequence he shares with Munro is very interesting. By this point, we only see him as a freak, and this scene surprises by revealing him as being rather socially and physically adept. Charm is a mask he can put on, and Spinell is quite good. He's also a mouth-breather second only to Darth Vader, and the soundtrack captures his labored panting throughout the film. In a subtle way, this contributes to the sense of the character being somehow unacceptable, unhealthy.

It's always tempting for a critic to watch a film and try to redeem it or rehabilitate it. Is this film vile or worthwhile? Or is it vile *and* worthwhile? Frankly, it's the latter. In a sense, it's even moral. The evil "monster" is punished by his own creations in the finale, (and he gets to say the line, "I'll be right back," which is usually reserved for the victims in this type of movie; not the killers).

Another thing that some critics may not tell you about *Maniac*: It's damn scary. There's an extended sequence in which Zito stalks a nurse from the Roosevelt Hospital. She walks home by dark of night, heading for the subway. She accidentally drops change out of her purse as Zito approaches. The nurse misses the train, and the director stages a great shot from the departing subway of the nurse standing there, isolated. Then there's a kind of "skip zoom" to Zito approaching down the stairs.

From there, it's a terrifying chase culminating in a station rest room, and this is scary and suspenseful. It's effectively shot, acted and edited, and it's not because of gore. It's because Spinell and Lustig have taken the time to let us know Zito, and therefore we are afraid. We know more than the nurse does; we know what this guy is capable of, and so we're really terrified for her.

It's not immoral but quite the opposite to create a film in which violence has consequences. In which a killer is depicted as a sad, frightening human being rather than a faceless automaton in a mask. In which one is encouraged to shudder, not laugh at the plight of a victim. As a carefully constructed film, *Maniac* requires that the audience come to it able to read the images, able to countenance its point of view, and understand that while the movie concerns vile, horrible things, it is not, in the final analysis, a reflection of that material. After watching *Maniac*, you'll want to take a deep breath, maybe even a shower, but you won't have wasted ninety minutes on something that has no meaning, no pulse, no heart.

Motel Hell



Critical Reception

“A witty little comedy made all the more delicious by its lapses into bad taste.”—Gene Wright. *Horrorshows: The A-To-Z of Horror in Film, TV, Radio and Theater*, Facts on File Publications, 1986, page 130.

“This entry into the Ed Gein-inspired movie sweepstakes is more akin to a cut-rate carnival ride than a direct telling of the real-life cannibal/murderer. Genuine jolts and thrills are merrily mixed with razor sharp wit that teeters on the surreal. *Motel Hell* possesses a vitality and verve that aids in propelling the film from its cheap trappings to something acutely original, and damned special.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

“*Motel Hell* recognized some of the dark humor of Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and fashioned a whole film on it. The similarities between the two films are striking (plus, one can just imagine Charlton Heston tell using what Farmer Vincent’s fritters are really made of in his best *Soylent Green* anguish), but *Motel Hell* is basically a fun little movie. Rory Calhoun was clearly having a blast making this movie, and his enthusiasm is infectious.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

“Despite a preponderance of gore, the film is respectably shot and edited, and Calhoun does justice to an often ridiculous script.... Also, after a string of chillers in which any female under 25 was fair game, here is a non-sexist approach in which everybody gets it, regardless of gender.”—*People Weekly*, December 8, 1980, page 28.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rory Calhoun (Farmer Vincent Smith); Paul Linke (Bruce Smith); Nancy Parsons (Ida Smith); Nina Axelrod (Terry); Wolfman Jack (Reverend Billy); Elaine Joyce (Edith Olson); Dick Curtis (Guy Robaire); Monique St. Pierre (Debbie); Rosanne Katon (Suzi); E. Hampton Beagle (Bob Anderson); Everett Creach (Bo Tulinski); Michael Melvin (Ivan); John Ratzenberger (Drummer); Marc Silver (Guitarist); Victoria Hartman (Female Terrible); Gwil Richards (Mr. Owens); Toni Gillman (Mrs. Owens); Shaylin & Heather Hendrixson

(Twins).

CREW: A Camp Hill Production. *Associate Producer:* Austen Jewell. *Music Composed and Conducted by:* Lance Rubin. *Film Editor:* Bernard Gribble. *Art Director:* Joseph M. Altadonna. *Director of Photography:* Thomas Del Ruth. *Executive Producer:* Herb Jaffe. *Special Effects:* Adam R. Calvert. *Stunt Coordinator:* Gene Hartline. “*You’re Eating My Heart Out*” sung by: Kregg Nance. *Producers:* Steven-Charles Jaffe, Robert Jaffe. *Directed by:* Kevin Connor. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

P.O.V.

“I never worried about whether people got it or not. You can’t always worry about that when you make movies. You have to do your thing. I’ve no idea why it has become a cult classic. The major difference to the slasher films, as I’ve said before, is that you never see any violence or blood—it is all suggested. It’s what you don’t see and imagine that has the effect.”—Director Kevin Connor discusses *Motel Hell*.

INCANTATION: “It takes all kinds of critters to make Farmer Vincent fritters.”—A catchy ad for Farmer Vincent’s smoked meats in *Motel Hell*.

SYNOPSIS: Farmer Vincent (Calhoun), proprietor of Motel Hello and Farmer Vincent’s Smoked Meats, regularly arranges car accidents on a nearby road, so that he can abduct the injured, plant them in the ground, fatten them up, and then use them as the prime ingredients in his smoked culinary delights. One night, he rescues a woman after a motorcycle wreck and brings her back to his house, where he lives with his strange and psychotic sister, Ida (Parsons).

Together they nurse Terry (Axelrod) back to health, careful not to tell her that her spouse is being harvested in Vincent’s secret garden. Vincent’s young brother, a sheriff named Bruce (Linke), falls for Terry, and is disturbed when Vincent wants to marry her himself. After a falling-out, Bruce investigates and learns of the murderous activities going on near Motel Hell.

Before long, there’s a war that turns brother against brother inside Farmer Vincent’s slaughterhouse. The key to victory for Bruce is the fact that some of the harvested—those planted in the ground with their throats slit—would very much like to take revenge upon their captors...

COMMENTARY: It’s unfortunate that so many great horror films

released in the early 1980s got lumped into the “slasher” catch-all descriptor. Not that there’s anything wrong with the slasher paradigm or its practitioners, but the term “slasher” doesn’t do justice to a film such as Tobe Hooper’s *The Funhouse* (1981) or Kevin Connor’s country masterpiece and satire, *Motel Hell*.

The Funhouse is a self-reflexive work that asks audiences to ponder the entertainment value of horror movies (and which compares the horror film to a carnival). *Motel Hell* is a black comedy about hypocrisy, about the way in which every person, even serial killers like Farmer Vincent, tell themselves little lies to get through the day. It’s easier to do terrible things, one concludes, when you believe you’re doing good.

Farmer Vincent makes a living via his out-of-the-way motel and his nocturnal practice of waylaying unsuspecting motorists. On the former front, Vincent must deal with two swingers who arrive at his place and take a room. Edie, the wife in this visiting couple, utilizes a bullwhip in their sex game, and her husband is a cross-dresser. This couple is so sexually perverse that they permit Ida and Vincent (whom they also mistake for swingers) to administer to them nitrous oxide, and even hogtie them. Vincent and Ida view the couple as freaks and weirdos, even though it is *they* who commit acts of egregious violence, not to mention cannibalism.

Another guest at the motel fears that she’s contracted a venereal disease from a ski instructor. And who should come down the road early in the film but a punk rock back called Ivan and the Terribles? One of their hit songs is the charmingly titled “I’ve Had Enough of You.”



American Gothic? Ida (Nancy Parsons) and Farmer Vincent (Rory Calhoun) strike a pose in Kevin Connor's horror satire, *Motel Hell* (1980).

All of these characters are, like the swinger couple, considered deviants by upright Ida or Vincent. Some of them are immoral, some in love with the culture of death, and some into bondage. Again, nothing these characters do or say could possibly be as egregious a sin as planting people in the ground and using them for sausage.

Yet Vincent and Ida proclaim that they live by the word of God. They quote the Bible in the film. “What does the Good Book say?” asks one. “Do unto others?” replies the other. They believe their lifestyle is righteous, and their needs and obsessions give them the right to hurt others. The important distinction is not just that they are psychopaths, like the clan in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but that they consider themselves above reproach, morally speaking. They’re just good country folk! Red State values voters, right?

Remember, the 1980s was all about that “don’t worry, be happy/be afraid, be very afraid” duality, and it’s present in spades in *Motel Hell*. The “victims” appear fringy (if not more so) than Farmer Vincent, yet he is the one who is really sick. We might blanch at punk rock fashions, perverse sex games, or STDs, but again, this is nothing compared to that secret garden and cannibalism.

On the surface at least, Farmer Vincent appears normal, a good, solid country boy and representative of the American heartland. He wants to marry a girl, Terry, before he has sexual intercourse because that’s the proper way to do things. But how, if you believe in the proper way of doing things, can you sanction murder? Well, how does a righteous televangelist like Oral Roberts ask for cash, lest God call him home? How can Man of God Jimmy Swaggart solicit a prostitute? How come President Reagan, a family values conservative, is divorced? The right wing of Christian politics in America often reveals this double standard. Do what I say, not what I do.

As the movie points out, Vincent is the biggest hypocrite of all, because he has used preservatives. Just as the bondage couple doesn’t really want to feel true pain, and just like the rock band that sings about death doesn’t want to die, Farmer Vincent is a fella who doesn’t really practice what he preaches. Inside he knows this—has always known—but he lies about it to himself and to the others.

All of this material is brought out by a brilliant script by Robert and Steven-Charles Jaffe. It has some of the sharpest, funniest dialogue you’ll hear in any horror film of the 1980s. “No wonder you’re famous,” enthuses one character after tasting Vincent’s fritters, “how come we don’t know you?” And then there’s Vincent’s moment of

uncertainty, his flash of insight that perhaps he has done something wrong: “Sometimes, I wonder about the karmic implications of these acts.”

A song heard on the radio includes the thematically important line, “You’re eating out my heart and soul,” and the lyrics are not only highly authentic sounding, but very amusing.

Played with a straight face, *Motel Hell* is not only genuinely funny, but damn frightening. Vincent’s secret garden, a place where little potato sacks stick out of the ground and victims (their vocal cords severed) are buried up to their necks in dirt, is a nasty place. The victims gurgle for help, hoping it isn’t time for Farmer Vincent to harvest them. Although, because he believes in being humane to animals, he attempts to distract them with a hypno-wheel before snapping their necks. Still, this is one field of nightmares you don’t want to end up in. The ending, which features a return of the living dead-style siege of the would-be victims (still gurgling) and dueling chainsaws, is a bizarre high-watermark of low-budget 1980s horror films.

CLOSE-UP: Checkin’ into the Motel Hell: “I’d been in Los Angeles for three months and was getting nowhere when I decided to collect some tapes from an agent, Bobby Litman,” explains director Kevin Connor, as he sets the scene for the creation of *Motel Hell*.

“As I walked into the agency, he came out of his office to refill his coffee mug and saw me. He asked me how I was getting on; ‘Not so good,’ I replied. ‘Come into my office and I’ll get you a job,’ he said. He called another agent who just happened to have an enquiry for a young director to helm a horror movie. This was *Motel Hell*.

“I lugged a copy of *From Beyond the Grave* to United Artists and showed it to the Jaffe Brothers, Stephen and Robert,” Connor remembers. “They loved the film and gave me the [*Motel Hell*] script to read. I read it back at my apartment and the opening scenes were ‘EXT. MOTEL HELL. NIGHT, then INT. MOTEL HELL. BEDROOM. A fat woman is in bed with a pig and a dildo....’

“Despite this, I read on and finished the script,” Connor says. “I told the Jaffe Brothers that I would love to direct the movie as long as it was a black comedy, and removing all unnecessary crudeness. They agreed, and that is the movie that you see today.”

Director Connor, the man behind *The Land That Time Forgot* (1975) and *At The Earth’s Core* (1976), describes *Motel Hell* as “just good,

honest satire” and says he “thoroughly enjoyed” the script because “it was tongue in cheek. The black humor appealed to me, and it wasn’t in response to any other movie trend.”

Connor also enjoyed his cast, recalling a “very pleasant shoot.”

“Nancy Parson and Rory Calhoun were a delight, as was the rest of the cast and crew,” he recollects. “Rory and Nancy were naturals. They loved each other and they certainly didn’t have to work at it.”

One bizarre aspect of the film was the hypno-wheel which distracts the victims in the secret garden as they’re being slaughtered. Connor recalls how it came about: “The prop guys came up with the mechanics of the wheel, but the idea was spelled out in the script. All I remember about shooting it was that it was night, and it was freezing cold. The poor actors who were in the ground were terrified of snakes and spiders.”

According to the director, the most difficult aspect of shooting actually involved the dueling chainsaws in the finale, “an idea for which came up at the last moment,” he says.

“I think we did it in a day. The big problem was that by now the carcasses of the pigs were somewhat ripe. The chainsaws had rubber blades and we used stuntmen when the characters wore the pig heads.”

And did Connor give any special direction to Rory Calhoun during the scene involving Father Vincent’s deathbed admission that he used preservatives?

“Yes, the preservatives line is very funny,” he recalls, “but we never had a table reading or rehearsed until getting on the set. Notice that Calhoun played the line straight.”

Indeed, and much of the film seems to be about degrees of weirdness. Is Vincent, in the final analysis, that much stranger or kinkier than the punk rockers who smoke weed? Swingers with whips? Is the film saying that weird is only a matter of degrees, except that Vincent crosses a line because he hurts people?

“Only that all these weirdos get their comeuppance at the end of the day,” suggests Connor. “It’s a Hollywood cliché—good guys win, bad guys lose....”

Mother's Day

★ ½

Critical Reception

“It’s as though the persons responsible for it possess some fearsome power as yet unknown to science called anti-talent.”—Tom Buckley, *The New York Times*, September 22, 1980, page C20.

“What do drain cleaners, rape, *Deliverance*, *Last House on the Left*, and a whole bunch of other nasty things mixed together look like? This movie had to tell us. Thanks, like the 1980s weren’t bleak enough. The 1980s horror films that tried to scare us or thrill us are the ones we remember fondly today. The ones that tried to out-gore or out-mean the competition, like this one, are becoming distant memories. See it if you really need to complete your holiday-related films, but otherwise just walk away. I will follow.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

“*Mother’s Day* has been routinely though no less unfairly, relegated to the grade Z ranks of holiday slasher flicks like *April Fool’s Day*, *Happy Birthday to Me*, and *Silent Night, Deadly Night*. If you’ve dismissed the film in the past, give it another shot. *Mother’s Day* is a poignant slice of social commentary laced with heavy doses of black humor and biting satire.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Holden McGuire (Ike); Billy Ray McQuade (Addley); Rose Ross (Mother); Nancy Hendrickson (Abbey); Deborah Luce (Jackie); Tiana Pierce (Trina); Robert Collins (Ernie); Karl Sandys (The Dobber); Marsella Davidson (Terry); Kevin Lowe (Ted); Scott Lucas (Storekeeper); Ed Battle (Door Man); Robert Carnegie (Tex).

CREW: Saga films A.B. Presents a Duty Production. *Produced by:* Michael Kravitz, Charles Kaufman. *Written by:* Charles Kaufman, Warren Leight. *Director of Photography:* Joe Mangine. *Supervising Editor:* Daniel Lowenthal. *Associate Producers:* Lloyd Kaufman, Michael Herz. *Executive Producer:* Alexander Beck. *Music:* Phil Gallo Clem Vicari. *Production Design:* Susan Kaufman. *Special Effects and Makeup:* Josie Caruso, Robert E. Holland. *Directed by:* Charles Kaufman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ten years after their graduation from Wolfbreath College, three friends who call themselves “The Rat Pack,” Jackie (Luce),

Abbey (Hendrickson) and Trina (Pierce), get together for their annual mystery weekend vacation, this year deep in rural New Jersey.

At night, they are ambushed in their sleeping bags by two unwashed simpletons, Ike (McGuire) and Addley (McQuade), who drag them through the forest to an isolated house where their demented mother (Ross) awaits. Addley rapes Jackie while Trina watches, and Ike and Mother encourage his monstrous behavior. The next morning, Trina and Jackie make a daring escape from the isolated house, taking the badly wounded Jackie with them, but Ike pursues relentlessly.

After a death in the woods, the surviving Rat Packers take their bloody revenge to Ike, Addley and Mother, unaware that Mother's sister—a savage named Queenie—may also live in the woods.

COMMENTARY: Stupid is as stupid does, someone famous once declared. And *Mother's Day* is woefully stupid, an excessively amateurish entry in the “rape and revenge” or “savage cinema” subgenre. Everything about the film from the performances and makeup to lighting and screenplay fails to attain a threshold of even modest believability or a modicum of authenticity. Made on a meager \$150,000 budget, *Mother's Day* is a lowbrow exercise in glaring, bald-faced insanity.

And frankly, all that comes from a reviewer who admires the savage cinema. I even rank this subgenre as my all-time favorite amongst the horror “types.” My wife frequently wonders why the appeal, and I keep informing her that only the savage horror movies about random violence and “societal” clashes between classes of folks like those in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) really and truly scare me. No matter how many horror films I screen, a good “rape and revenge” movie always terrifies me.

That’s why I’m quite certain, down to my horror-movie-loving core, that *Mother's Day* is a bad movie. I can see why certain critics defend the film. I understand that many people have read into the film a satire of our “TV society,” since the film is littered with references to the pop culture. For instance, you’ll see the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, a Batman action figure, Ernie (of Bert and Ernie of *Sesame Street*), G.I. Joe and even King Kong. You’ll see Trix cereal, and a death by television set that was repeated many years later, in Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996).

Yet, this is one of those cases where discussing what the movie “means” is actually more enjoyable than watching the actual film. The

performances are literally all over the place, uneven to the point of absurdity, and the film doesn't even attempt to maintain a sense of internal consistency.

For instance: You're being hunted in the woods by evil, unwashed heathens who haven't pinpointed your location yet. So what do you do? Hide or seek shelter? Or, like the dumb female characters in this movie, do you scream at the top of your lungs, so the killers can find you more quickly?

The worst thing about *Mother's Day* is that it lets itself off the hook for the sexual violence it so cavalierly depicts. In the film, a brutal rape is dramatized about halfway through. There's nudity, and simulated humping. It's a horrible and disturbing moment ... something you might see in *Last House on the Left* or *I Spit On Your Grave*. Fine, but this film attempts to take the rapist off the hook for his brutalization through the inclusion of two very important story elements.

First, there's an early scene of the soon-to-be-raped woman and her friends sexually humiliating a boyfriend on a pitcher's mound (thus lending credence to the notion that the rape victim had it coming ... since she'd humiliated a man). Secondly, the film makes the twisted Mother the ultimate villain, the puppet master pulling the strings. So it's not the boy's fault he raped a woman ... he had permission from another woman, his mammy.

This is a piss-poor way to handle the rape dynamic in the film. By contrast, look at the horrifying rape in *Last House on the Left*. It's brutal, disgusting and heart-wrenching, and never gets undercut by humor or excuses. There's a haunting moment where the rapist, Krug, looks around and realizes what he's done, while the victim attempts to wash herself in a nearby lake. It's disturbing, it's real, and it doesn't take responsibility off Krug's shoulders, even while acknowledging that he's "human" and perhaps feels a small (very small) tinge of regret.

Again, just to be clear, I have no problem with the depiction of rape in the savage cinema. Three of my favorite movies, *Straw Dogs*, *Last House on the Left* and *A Clockwork Orange*, all deal with the issue in trenchant, sincere fashion, making statements about violence and machismo. But *Mother's Day* fails to deal with rape honestly or responsibly.

There's a gawking, leering aspect to the sexual violence portrayed in the film, an invitation to wallow in the gutter with the filmmakers and

take a perverse enjoyment from one poor woman's plight. I'm willing to take a trip to the gutter if I'm going to learn something about human nature there, or even about film stylistics, but if it's just for the sake of stupidity, count me out.

A film that's been attacked on grounds like these is *Maniac*, but I'll defend *Maniac* to my dying day because *Maniac* maintains a creepy tone and atmosphere throughout. It's not just sleazy, it's *about* sleaziness, and it doesn't ask the audience to laugh at murder or rape. It's pretty clear in that film that the serial killer is one sick and sickening miscreant, not a buffoon like the brothers in *Mother's Day*. We aren't asked to laugh at what the killer in *Maniac* does. If anything, we want to look away...

But the real reason to despise *Mother's Day* is that it can't create a consistent tone, a single three-dimensional performance, or even a halfway decent effects moment. The blood looks fake, the night-time sequences are so over lit that they're almost washed out, and the "sting in the tale/tail" comes out of left field. The stunts are ridiculous (when one of the brothers fall down a mountainside, it's painfully obvious the actor is forcing himself down the hill, not actually falling). Most damningly, *Mother's Day* really adds nothing new or valuable to a superb—if disturbing—subgenre of horror.

If those boys watched so much TV in the late 1970s and early 1980s—as we're led to believe—they would have attempted to get the girls to like them by imitating the behavior of men they see on TV; not bald-faced sexual attack, right? So the film doesn't even get its satire right. Imagine if the boys had captured the girls and forced them to a nice, sit-down, three-course meal in suits and ties, a variation of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s famous "tea party" scene. Imagine if they had tried the "sitcom" approach of courting women? Now *that* would have been a satire, but not this.

Murder By Phone

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Richard Chamberlain (Nat Bridger); John Houseman (Dr. Stanley Markowitz); Sara Bostford (Ridley Taylor); Robin Gammell (Noah Clayton); Gary Reineke (Lt. Meara); Barry Morse (Frank Waites); Alan Scaife (John); James B. Douglas (Jack Gilsdorf); Ken

Pogue (Thorner); Neil Munro (Winters); Jefferson Mappin (Photographer); Tom Butler (Detective Tamblyn); Colin Fox (Dr. Alderman).

CREW: Gurston Rosenfeld and Michael A. Levine Present a Robert Cooper Production of a Michael Anderson film. *Director of Photography:* Reginald H. Morris. *Film Editor:* Seamus Flannery. *Music Composed and Conducted by:* John Barry. *Music Orchestrated and Performed by:* Jonathan Elias, John Peterson. *Executive Producer:* Stanley Colbert. *Co-Producer:* Brian Walker. *Screenplay:* Michael Butler, Dennis Shryack, John Kent Harrison. *Story:* George Armondo, James Whiton, Michael Butler, Dennis Shryack. *Produced by:* Robert Cooper. *Directed by:* Michael Anderson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

INCANTATION: “By the year 2000, there will be 1.4 trillion phones in the world.”—A bizarre prediction—no doubt intended to be menacing and chill-inducing—in *Murder By Phone*.

SYNOPSIS: Environmentalist–ecology professor Nat Bridger (Chamberlain) investigates the death of a prized former pupil at the behest of her grieving family. The official word is that the student died of a heart attack, but Bridger, a former left-wing radical, is suspicious and consults with his friend, Dr. Markowitz (Houseman), about the situation.

Bridger also visits the scene of his student’s death and speaks with a bag lady who witnessed the event. The bag lady reports seeing lightning shoot out of a pay phone, and Bridger learns that there have been a series of similar deaths in the city.

With the help of a mural painter (Botsford), Bridger steals into the phone company and uncovers a conspiracy of silence that goes all the way to the top, to the company’s president (Morse). But Bridger also learns that the murders are being orchestrated by a wronged former employee, now on a vengeful murder spree. Bridger goes head to head with the deranged techno-killer (Gammell), and is able, with the help of the police, to reverse the momentum of a deadly phone call, sending all of its energy back to the maniacal caller.

COMMENTARY: Personally, I’m awaiting for the sequel to *Murder By Phone*, entitled *Murder By Microwave Oven*, but that’s just me. I can see it now: “By the year 2007, there will be 7.5 trillion microwave ovens in the world ... all set to ‘reheat.’”

But seriously, *Murder By Phone* is a so-straight-faced-it's-actually-funny "techno" horror film in the vein of 1970s classics like *The China Syndrome* (which warned about the dangers of nuclear power), *Coma* (which warned about hospitals and organ transplants) and *The Andromeda Strain* (1971). Only thing is, all of those aforementioned films actually dealt with things that are truly frightening to at least some plausible degree, and in some circumstances, even deadly. *Murder By Phone* attempts the same movie alchemy by featuring the outdated and innocuous rotary telephone as an instrument of fear.

As you can guess, time hasn't been kind to this movie...

Yes, telephones *can* actually be quite scary. Consider *Black Christmas* (1974), a semi-classic about a serial killer—obscene phone caller stalking a sorority during the holidays, or better yet, the terrifying and pulse-pounding *When A Stranger Calls* (1979), about a house with two telephone lines ... and a killer closing in on a babysitter from one of them. Both of those examples reveal how the telephone can serve as an effective instrument of terror. Of relatively recent note, *Scream* (1996) did interesting things with cell phones too.

So technically, it is possible, one supposes, to make a frightening genre picture with the telephone as the *object d'scare*. And the makers of *Murder By Phone* certainly give that enterprise their all. The death scenes in the film are glorious, slow-motion paeans to death and destruction. Sparks fly, plastic melts, and bodies bleed.

One man answers the phone and is actually launched out a window while still seated in a chair. Seat and sitter land with a thud in a parking lot far below. In the prologue, a good Samaritan picks up a ringing telephone in a subway station and, when hit by the "evil" force, is thrown onto a moving escalator, while the offending phone itself boils. The final "blowback" against the telephone killer at the climax (culminating with his eyes turning blood red and burning out) is also startlingly gory.

And yet, it's difficult not to giggle. At one point of high tension, the camera embarks on a slow, methodical circle around the possibly deadly telephone as Ridley (lovely Sarah Botsford) contemplates answering it. The camera registers her fear in the background; the menacing phone front and center in the foreground—like the shark in *Jaws* or something. It's just a bit of overkill.

Richard Chamberlain's deadpan sincerity in the role of Nat Bridger, an "environmental crusader," also tends to work against the film. The

screenplay categorizes him as a radical lefty liberal-type, but I fail to see how battling the telephone company qualifies him as a stalwart environmentalist.

Murder By Phone also showcases a number of familiar touches to those familiar with the era. There's an evil company at work behind the scenes (*Alien* [1979], *The Clonus Horror* [1979], *Humanoids from the Deep* [1980], *The Final Conflict* [1981]), a conspiracy to hide the truth, typical of the post-Watergate and early Reagan ages, and the use of technology as a bugaboo.

Perhaps it's unkind to be cruel to *Murder By Phone*. But even that title just calls out for a laugh, doesn't it?

New Year's Evil

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Roz Kelly (Diane "Blaze" Sullivan); Kip Niven (Richard Sullivan); Chris Wallace (Lt. Clayton); Grant Cramer (Derek Sullivan); Louisa Moritz (Sally); Jed Mills (Ernie); Taafe O'Connell (Jane); Jon Greene (Sgt. Green); Teri Comley (Teenage Girl); Anita Crane (Lisa); Jennie Anderson (Nurse); Alicia Dhanifu (Yvonne); Wendy Sue Rosloff (Makeup Girl); John Landon (Floor Manager); John Alderman (Dr. Reed); Michael Frost (Larry); Ray Leonard, John Pakalenka, Richard Miller, Clifford White (Shadow).

CREW: A Golan/Globus Production, An Emmett Alston Film. *Film Editor:* Dick Brummer. *Director of Photography:* Edward Thomas. *Music Supervisor:* Rex Devereaux. *Music:* W. Michael Lewis, Laurin Rinder. *Associate Producer:* Christopher Pearce. *Executive Producer:* Billy Fine. *Produced by:* Menahem Golan, Yorum Globus. *Screenplay by:* Leonard Neubauer. *Story by:* Leonard Neubauer, Emmett Alston. *Directed by:* Emmett Alston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: "You've castrated me. And that is not nice."—Richard Sullivan (Kip Niven) explains his motivation in Emmett Alston's slasher film, *New Year's Evil*.

SYNOPSIS: On New Year's Eve in Los Angeles, Diane "Blaze" Sullivan (Kelly), the sexy host of *Hollywood Hotline*, a rock 'n' roll TV call-in show, receives a call-in request from a psychopath called "Evil" who tells her that his New Year's resolution is to commit the murder of

someone close to her.

Even while ignoring her troubled son, Derek (Cramer), Sullivan continues with the show and notifies the police of the situation. Lt. Clayton (Wallace) warns that finding a “phone freak” in the rock crowd could prove difficult. The killer—an expert in disguises who electronically alters his voice—stabs to death a beautiful nurse named Jane (O’Connell) at a private mental hospital, the Crawford Sanitarium.

The police deduce that the psycho is murdering someone each hour from 9:00 pm to 12:00 am, as each region of the country reaches midnight; his next victim is a young lady attending the shooting of *Hollywood Hotline!* As the killer closes in on Diane, masquerading first as a priest, then a police officer, and finally wearing a Halloween mask, his identity ultimately proves a startling surprise, and Diane is taken aback.

Now in the killer’s clutches, she is chained to the underside of the elevator car, and the psycho sends her on a hair-raising ride up and down the shaft...

COMMENTARY: *New Year’s Evil* is a slasher film in which the organizing principle is another holiday or special “event” date—December 31, New Year’s Eve.

In this case, the organizing principle grants the killer (named Evil..get it, New Year’s Evil?) not merely a holiday occasion on which to do his dirty work, but a schedule too. Since America is such a large country that it exists in different time zones, the killer gets three opportunities to ring in the New Year ... with a knife.

The organizing principle also presents the film with its primary setting (a Hollywood “countdown” party to midnight), and therefore the opportunity for several rock ‘n’ roll performances. The bands featured include Shadow and Made in Japan, if there are any fans out there.

Since it’s a slasher film, all the ingredients of the paradigm are in place. There’s gratuitous nudity and a killer with a secret identity—in this case, one who electronically alters his voice just like the nemesis in *Scream* (1996).

However, the biggest deviation in the “psychotic killer” cliché in this film involves his uniform. The killer changes costumes repeatedly, even hiding behind a moustache for a while. He masquerades as a policeman, a man of the cloth and a doctor ... all figures of authority.

... people the audience (and the would-be victims) are inclined to trust.

The killer is depicted as human rather than as a barely conscious, difficult-to-injure killing machine (*a la* Jason). For instance, it's a surprise in the slasher format to see the villain's strategy (or massacre) go off the rails as significantly as it does here. But in *New Year's Evil*, the killer falls behind in his master plan, and is actually chased down by angry bikers. The tables are turned.

One of the classic flaws of the slasher formula is surely that the killer *always* holds the superior hand when it comes to luck. Jason or Michael is always standing right where he should be standing to kill the right victim in the right order ... at least until the final girl puts up a fight. It's not a very realistic situation and *New Year's Evil* acknowledges that flaw in the paradigm, and gives the killer his own problems to grapple with.

It's pertinent too that *New Year's Evil* final girl, Diane, is a fame-seeking star who ignores the cries for help from her suicidal son, Derek. In other words, this final girl isn't a very nice one, which may be why the creators of the film make her suffer so. Her punishment is hellish ... shackled to the bottom of an elevator car and sent up and down the shaft. But remember too that final girls tend to be the most resourceful and "insightful" characters in their particular dramas. That also isn't true of Diane in *New Year's Evil*. She appears sideswiped when the identity of her pursuer is learned. She's an oblivious "celebrity."

A red herring is also present (in the form of Blaze's addled son) in *New Year's Evil*, and there's the obligatory scene featuring weed, and even our old friend, the cat jump. The tour of the dead also gets a funny little twist here. It occurs at a playground, where bodies are positioned on a slide and a swing.

Ultimately, the murderer is outed as Diane's husband, a former mental patient who hates his wife and feels castrated by her. This puts Sullivan (the murderer) squarely in the Norman Bates mold; someone driven to violence by his family relationships. But he still picks random victims like Jason or Michael, in part, we infer, so as to cloak his identity from the police. As his alter ego, "Evil," Sullivan creates the perfect anonymous identity. Were he to succeed in his massacre, police would suspect that Diane was merely the last in a string of New Year's Eve victims ... not the prime target of the killer.

New Year's Evil's frequent variations on the established slasher paradigm make the film interesting for a single viewing, but pace is also an essential ingredient in the horror genre, and this movie drags badly at points, especially when the narrative momentum ceases, and the audience must endure on-stage rock 'n' roll acts. Musical performance and horror movies tend not to mix efficiently if eighties films like this one and *Monster Dog* (1985) are any test.

Finally, the acting in this film is pretty weak. It's naturalistic, but barely adequate for the material.

Night School



Cast and Crew

CAST: Rachel Ward (Eleanor); Leonard Mann (Lt. Judd Austin); Drew Snyder (Professor Vincent Millett); Joseph R. Sicari (Taj); Nicholas Cairis (Gus); Karen MacDonald (Carol); Annette Miller (Helene Griffin); Bill McCann (Gary); Margo Skinner (Stevie Cabot); Elizabeth Barnitz (Kim Morrison); Holly Hardman (Kathy); Leonard Corman (Priest); Belle McDonald (Marjorie Armand); Ed Higgins (Coroner); William McDonald (Medical Examiner); Kevin Fennessy (Harry the Janitor); Ed Chalmers, John Blood (Construction Workers); Lisa Allee (Lisa)

CREW: Lorimar Presents a Resource Production. *Associate Producer:* Leon Williams. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Film Editor:* Robert Reitano. *Written by:* Ruth Avergon. *Executive Producers:* Marc Gregory Comjean, Bernard Kebadjian. *Producers:* Larry Bab, Ruth Avergon. *Costume Designer:* Dianne Finn-Chapman. *Stunt Coordinator:* Ted Duncan. *Directed by:* Kenneth Hughes. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Animals kill when they're hungry or when they're threatened, but man is the only animal who destroys his own kind for the sheer pleasure of it."—A disturbing thought is raised in *Night School*.

SYNOPSIS: When a young teacher's aide is decapitated on a playground merry-go-round by a motorcycle helmet-adorned psycho-killer, the only clue to the murderer's identity involves the night school at Wendell College, which two victims attended.

Lt. Austin (Mann) investigates the case and comes to suspect that the murders have something in common with anthropology professor Vincent Millett (Snyder) and his foreign teaching assistant, Eleanor (Ward). In particular, Millett has a reputation for seducing his female students, and both of the dead girls may have been paramours. When another of Millet's students, Kim (Barnitz), is decapitated at her job at the Boston Aquarium, the pattern is firmly established.

Austin goes in search of the killer, but his partner suspects that a peeping-tom busboy at the local Lamplight Restaurant, Garry (McCann), is the actual killer.

COMMENTARY: Forecasting 2004's *High Tension*, the slasher film *Night School* combines its final girl and serial killer into one psyche. In other words, as *Night School* progresses from victim to victim (all of whom are girlfriends of a promiscuous college professor or other "threats" to his well-being and family), the audience is led to believe that his current girlfriend, Eleanor (Rachel Ward) will be the final victim.

The film goes so far as to include a decoy scene wherein a seemingly terrified Eleanor attempts to reach her apartment by dark of night and is trailed by a stalker. She fumbles, drops her books, grips her keys and barely gets inside as the stranger nears.

This is all brilliant misdirection, however, as Ward herself is the head-hunter, killing any and all dangers to her family unit. "I did it for you, Vincent," she explains to the promiscuous prof—who has at least four paramours. "A family's sacred ... any threat to that sanctity I must strike down. I did it because I love you."

Thus, *Night School* is a textbook example of the manner in which (in slasher films) an ethical transgression (an infidelity) is punished; and conservative mores about American culture and family are reinforced. The idea is quite simply that when Professor Millett plays, he pays. His girl at home (three months pregnant) exacts revenge against both him and the unethical girlfriends who would go after a spoken-for man. Message to viewers: Don't mess around on your family.

The surprise revelation that Eleanor is herself the killer grants *Night School* a bit of differentiation from the heavily populated slasher pack, and Kenneth Hughes' film thrives on its ability to point fingers at the wrong guy and make the audience incorrectly perceive certain characters. Indeed, proving to be an embodiment of useless authority, even the cops in the film don't solve the mystery adequately ... they're

just as bamboozled as the audience! When Professor Millett sacrifices himself for the murderous Ward and his unborn child at the end of the film, he dons the costume of the serial killer—takes the fall—and dies. Case closed...

Taking down our slasher film paradigm from the aesthetic shelf and studying it, one can see how cleverly *Night School* manipulates the form. The organizing principle is, indeed a night school, a location which provides the character base, including professors, teachers' assistants, administrators and lovely students. Furthermore, the locale furnishes the motivations for the killing spree: Eleanor is a jealous girlfriend anxious to eliminate competition for a professor's affections. Like many examples of the slasher school, the killer is separated from the other characters in the film in that she wears a distinctive uniform (a motorcycle jacket and helmet) and bears a highly individualized weapon, a scythe-like knife just perfect for the occasional afternoon decapitation.

Night School also throws a number of red herrings at the audience, so much so that it is kept off the scent of the real killer right until the big reveal. A busboy at Boston's Lamplight Restaurant is one such suspect; another is the school's lesbian dean. The latter is a particularly ravenous sort. She takes a coed, Kathy, to bed and starts to fondle her. "Does this bother you?" she asks. Notably, the film views the dean's tastes as perverse, and she suffers for her vice and immorality. Eleanor's excuse is merely that the dean threatens the family's livelihood: She had planned to fire the professor. Again, there's a deeply conservative tone to this movie. Anyone who threatens the conventional family or has alternative tastes gets a lopped head.

Only *Night School*'s final jolt is unconvincing, tending towards comedy. The ending finds the stalwart (yet ineffective) Lt. Austin spot the killer in his back seat. But it's a false attack; just his cop buddy in the back pulling a prank. This ending is the only part of *Night School* that feels pro forma, as though included simply to adhere to the slasher paradigm equation and meet audience expectations.

Some of the finest slasher films have a quality called *push back*. I hate examples of the genre wherein the victims go meekly to their doom, not even putting up a fight or seeming genuinely frightened. The better slasher films give even supporting characters a big chase set piece in which they can strut their stuff and face off against the killer. I'm reminded particularly of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) in which Sarah Michelle Gellar had a dynamic death scene; or Drew Barrymore's appearance in *Scream* (1996). *Night School* has significant

push back in a scene wherein a waitress is attacked and grapples with the killer, fighting for every second she has left. Of course, she doesn't survive, and her head ends up in the sink, but for a few precious moments there's hope she might make it.

There are better slasher films than *Night School* (and indeed, even in the 1980s), but nonetheless, this film works. The pursuits are tense, the imperiled characters fight back, the decapitation sequences are bracing, and the killer is unique. In an overdone subgenre, that's enough originality to merit *Night School* a passing grade.

Nightmare City

(*a.k.a. City of the Walking Dead*)

★ ½

Critical Reception

“The veritable Waterloo of zombie cinema, this lamentable reel-stain is, at its best moments, a forced and pointless test of endurance.... The movie is essentially a lot of running around punctuated by occasional moralizing, while the gore effects and suspense sequences are trite to the point of insult.”—Peter Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, McFarland, 2000, page 36.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Hugo Stiglitz (Miller); Laura Trotter (Dr. Anna Miller); Maria Rosario Omaggio (Sheila); Francisco Rabal (Major Holmes); Sonia Viviani (Cindy); Eduardo Fajardo (Dr. Kramer); Stefania D'Amario (Jessica Murchison); Ugo Bologna (Mr. Desmond); Sara Franchetti (Liz); Manolo Zarzo (Colonel Donohue); Tom Fellegi (Lt. Redman); Pierangelo Civera (Bob); Achille Belletti (Jim); Mel Ferrer (General Murchison).

CREW: An Italian-Spanish co-production, Dialchi Films, Rome, and Lotus Internacional Film. *Written by:* Piero Regnoli, Tony Corti, Jose Luis Delgado. *Set Designer:* Wolfgang Burman. *Art Director:* Mario Molli. *Costumes:* Silvana Scandariato. *Film Editor:* Daniele Alabiso. *Director of Photography:* Hans Burman. *Music:* Stelvio Cipriani. *Produced by:* Diego Alchimede. *Directed by:* Umberto Lenzi. *MPAA Rating:* Not available. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Well, the situation is hopeless.”—General Murchison (Mel Ferrer) makes a dire assessment in *Nightmare City*.

SYNOPSIS: A reporter named Miller (Stiglitz) arrives at the airport to cover a scientist's news conference about a radioactive spill when an unidentified military aircraft lands on the airstrip and lets loose a swarm of murderous, armed, flesh-eating, blood-drinking, psychotic zombies. Miller attempts to report the situation on the TV news, but is silenced by General Murchison (Ferrer), who believes the situation is already hopeless. The zombies run rampant through the city, attacking the newsroom and the local hospital where Miller's wife Anna (Trotter) works.

Miller and Anna escape in a stolen ambulance and stop at a rural snack stop, but even there, the murderous zombies await. General Murchison's daughter Jessica (D'Amario) and her husband Bob (Civera) learn too late of the apocalypse and are killed while on vacation.

Finally, the Millers flee on foot to an abandoned amusement park, but it is overrun with the murderous ghouls. They climb to the top of a roller-coaster and are nearly rescued by a military helicopter, when Stiglitz wakes up. It was all a dream! In fact, today is the very day he is to head to the airport to cover a scientist's news conference. But when he gets there this time, an unidentified military aircraft lands on the airstrip, and the doors open to reveal...

COMMENTARY: Umberto Lenzi's ultra-gory *Nightmare City* (a.k.a. *City of the Walking Dead*) is a mess of a film. In attempting to ape the template of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), it follows a group of uninteresting characters while they are attacked by rampaging extras playing "zombies," but in really bad makeup. The ultimate insult is the ending, a kind of "reset" which indicates the whole film is a bad dream that's about to become reality ... a stinker of a conclusion.

Which is not to say that the film doesn't have a few interesting moments. *Nightmare City* attempts to capture the fear of not knowing where your loved ones are in a disaster, when the "big one" finally hits. It captures an aura of anarchy too, but who's to say if that is intentional or just the result of an out-of-control, chaotic production?

This movie is actually ahead of other zombie films because it posits fast-moving, smart zombies who run, jump, signal to one another, and utilize tools. At one point, a zombie cuts a telephone cord with a garden implement, which certainly evidences some level of intelligence. It wasn't until *28 Days Later* (2003) and George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) that mainstream zombie films began

adding these touches as major plot points, though one can certainly make the argument Romero was leading up to it with moments in *Dawn of the Dead* (in which the zombies boasted some sense of residual memory) and *Day of the Dead* (with the training of the Bub character).

Despite mildly interesting flourishes, *Nightmare City* remains a cobbled-together disaster. Although lots of breasts get flashed (this is the eighties, after all), most of the other visuals are badly staged. The attacks look like unplanned free-for-alls, and individual zombie extras sometimes step out of character. Worse, the main characters are dullards who don't merit the least bit of sympathy, let alone attention.

But the most scorn must be heaped upon the film's misbegotten conclusion. After ninety minutes of repetitive attacks and escapes, the film re-sets to the beginning, with the main character reporting to the airport, only this time with knowledge of what is going to occur.

The pertinent question to ask here is simply, how did the protagonist glean information in his dream about people he had never met, in locales he had never imagined? I might be willing to accept precognition if the movie only concerned the hero's particular experiences (like the not-ineffective set piece at a roller-coaster). But the audience is supposed to believe Miller is privy to all the personal minutiae involving General Murchison? The people trapped in an elevator? The couple that is murdered in the countryside? Miller's dream includes specific dialogue, classified briefings and the like, and that's just a little bit hard to swallow.

Terrible as it is, *Nightmare City* would not prove the worst zombie movie of the 1980s. That honor goes to another Italian mess-terpiece, *Hell of the Living Dead*.

Phobia

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Paul Michael Glaser (Dr. Peter Ross); Susan Hogan (Jenny St. Clair); John Colicos (Inspector Barnes); David Bolt (Henry Owen); Patricia Collins (Dr. Alice Toland); David Eisner (Johnny Venuti); Lisa Langlois (Laura Adams); Robert O'Ree (Bubba King); Alexandra Stewart (Barbara Grey); Neil Vipond (Dr. Clegg); Marian Waldman (Mrs. Casey); Kenneth Walsh (Sgt. Wheeler); Gwen Thomas (Dr.

Clemens); Paddy Campanaro (Newswoman #1); Gerry Salsberg (Newsman #1); Peter Hicks (Newsman #2); Terry Martin, Ken Anderson (Police); Karen Pike, Wendy Jewell, Coleen Embree (Girls); Lorne Stepak (Teammate).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents, from Larry Spiegel, and Mel Bergman, a Borough Park production of A John Huston film. *Music*: Andre Gagnon. *Associate Producer*: Jonathan Kaplan. *Film Editor*: Stan Cole. *Production Design*: Ben Edwards. *Director of Photography*: Reginald H. Morris. *Executive Producers*: Larry Spiegel, Mel Bergman. *Screenplay by*: Lew Lehman, Jimmy Sangster, Peter Bellwood. *Story by*: Gary Sherman, Ronald Shusett. *Produced by*: Zale Magder. *Stunt Coordinators*: Robert Hannah, Paul Nuckles. *Directed by*: John Huston. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Peter Ross believes that his psychiatric patients can best overcome their intense phobias through his new procedure, “implosion therapy,” which forces the volunteers (all convicted criminals) to face their mortal fears. First, he creates terrifying images on an oversized screen for his patients to watch, and then puts them down in “real world” scenarios that challenge their phobias.

One day, he drops an agoraphobic named Barbara Grey (Stewart) in a busy subway and tells her to find her way to his home. After a panic attack, she does so, but once in his office she opens a file drawer and is killed by a bomb placed there. Inspector Barnes (Colicos) believes that someone is trying to kill Ross, but the doctor shrugs off the threat, over the objections of his ex-girlfriend and colleague, Dr. Alice Toland (Collins) and his current lover, Jenny St. Clair (Hogan).

Before long, the other members of his phobia group are also facing bizarre deaths. Henry (Bolt), a man afraid of heights, dies after falling from a skyscraper; a woman named Laura Adams (Langlois) who lives in mortal fear of attack is drowned in a bath tub, leaving just two group survivors, a thug named Johnny Venuti (Eisner) and a black man who is terrified of rattlesnakes, Bubba King (O'Ree). The police continue to investigate, and Toland and St. Clair begin to wonder if an incident from Ross's troubled youth—the drowning death of a sister—may play a role in the strange murders.

COMMENTARY: The early moments of director John Huston's middling film, *Phobia*, are its high point. In an unnerving pre-title sequence, a desperate claustrophobic twitches in his cell, and Huston's camera captures the imagery from an overhead angle as the sufferer's space grows progressively smaller and more confining. It's a

visualization of a patient's feelings of entrapment, told with precisely the right visual composition (one which indicates doom). It's perfect in every regard.

Soon after this tense opening, another exemplary sequence follows. A character named Miss Gray, an agoraphobe, is forced to face her fear (in a technique the film terms "implosion" therapy), and the audience hears Gray's inner monologue as she experiences a panic attack and boards the New York subway among throngs of commuters.

"I'm controlling my fear ... I won't panic ... I'll find my way ... I won't let them stop me ... I don't know where I am..." her inner voice tries to convince her, but fails to do so.

On and on this "fear" escalates, until Miss Gray can no longer face the crowds and flees the subway amidst a rising tide of people. She runs along a crowded boulevard and finally makes it to a place of solitude at last. It's her doctor's office, and the audience feels relieved for the poor woman that she's escaped from the terror that was so vexing her. In a quiet moment, she begins to inspect her physician's file cabinet ... but when she opens a drawer, a bomb explodes, killing her.

That's quite a surprise, and quite a cinematic moment, a terrifying release after minutes of mounting anxiety. However, the remainder of *Phobia* doesn't exactly live up to these moments of expressionist composition and high suspense. Instead, the film settles into a sleepy rut, exploring how Dr. Peter Ross (a seemingly tranquilized Paul Michael Glaser) forces his patients to face their fears. The audience is introduced to a woman named Laura with a "phobia" about being raped, a black man called Bubba who has a fear of snakes, and on and on, with each phobia meriting a spectacular death set piece. Even Dr. Ross seems to have a phobia of a kind ... he doesn't like being smothered by his girlfriends or ex-girlfriends. And there was that incident in his youth that involved drowning...

So what *Phobia* truly represents is an early 1980s version of the "psychological group" movie that was much more popular late in the slasher /rubber-reality cycle, with other prominent examples being *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987) and *Bad Dreams* (1988). In the "group"-type film, psychologically traumatized characters die in a manner closely related to their specific illness. So in the *Elm Street* film, Freddy's finger knives transform into hypodermic needles when he confronts an ex-junkie; and a kid who makes puppets is turned into a puppet himself in one nightmare, his veins becoming the puppet's strings.

Similarly, in the surprisingly lackluster *Phobia*, a character who feels afraid of heights falls to his death from the top of a skyscraper; a woman with a fear of rape is attacked in a bath tub, and on and on. There are no real surprises. Naturally, in a film like this one, which involves psychological patients, hospitals, and medical staff, a prime suspect is always the “pioneering” doctor who’s testing his revolutionary theory, and *Phobia* indeed culminates with the not-so-shocking revelation that Peter Ross—a sadist because of his own traumas—is actually orchestrating the terrible crimes.

The police inspector in the film, played by the late, great John Colicos, is given to exceptionally stupid dialogue throughout. “All that’s lacking is a motive,” he notes of the crimes at one point, failing to see the obvious: that Ross is staging crises for his patients as a way to prove his theory. Isn’t that a motive? Other characters fare as poorly, especially Patricia Collins as Dr. Alice Toland, Peter’s cloying ex. With John Huston at the helm, one would have expected a more tightly wrought screenplay, and a closer attention to details and mood.

Instead, the fatal flaw in *Phobia* is Glaser’s removed, glacial performance. Designed, perhaps, to seem a little short on sympathy, though he calls it “objectivity,” his character rather comes across as callous and a bit dull ... a cipher. One never feels that he is involved with the events going on around him. That means that the supposedly terrifying deaths of his patients, except for the rare ones like Gray’s memorable departure early in the film, feel like no more than impressive stunts.

Prom Night



Critical Reception

“[S]imply a bald-faced clone of *Carrie* and *Halloween*, complete with the latter’s Jamie Lee Curtis.”—Kim Holston and Tom Winchester, *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Film Sequels, Series and Remakes*. McFarland, 1997, page 391.

“What do you get if you remove everything of value from *Halloween* except Jamie Lee Curtis?”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

“The best thing about *Prom Night* is that it does precisely, and often

exquisitely, what all horror films promise and few deliver: it redeems the word ‘gripping’ from the trash heap of abused and overused adjectives.... Lynch builds his terror step by tiny step, a gradual acceleration toward a climax that is literally heart-pounding.”—John Gault, “High-school horror without the gore,” *MacLean’s*, September 8, 1980, page 62.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Leslie Nielsen (Mr. Hammond); Jamie Lee Curtis (Kim Hammond); Casey Stevens (Nick); Eddie Benton (Wendy); Michael Tough (Alex); Robert Silverman (Sykes); Pita Oliver (Vicky); David Mucci (Lou); Marybeth Rubens (Kelly); George Touliatos (McBride); David Bolt (Weller); Jeff Wincott (Drew); David Gardner (Dr. Fairchild); Joy Thompson (Jude); Sheldon Rybowski (Slick); Antoinette Bower (Mrs. Hammond); Liz Stalker Mason (Adele); Pam Henry (Car Hop); Lee Wildgen (Gang Member); Brock Simpson (Young Nick); Leslie Scott (Young Wendy); Tammy Bourne (Young Robin); Dean Bosacki (Young Alex); Debbie Greenfield (Young Kim); Karen Forbes (Young Judge); Joyce Kite (Young Kelly).

CREW: A Simcom Production. *Production Manager:* Dan Nyberg. *Music:* Carl Zittrer, Paul Zaza. *Casting:* Karen Hazzard, Sheila Manning. *Film Editor:* Brian Ravok. *Special Effects:* Al Cotter. *Prosthetics:* Warren Keillor. *Stunt Coordinator:* Terry Martin. *Supervising Editor:* Brian Ravok. *Director of Photography:* Robert New. *Screenplay:* William Gray. *Story by:* Robert Guza Jr. *Producer:* Peter Simpson. *Associate Producer:* Richard Simpson. *Original Disco Music:* Paul Zaza. “*Fade to Black*” sung by: Gordene Simpson. *Directed by:* Peter Lynch. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four young friends, Jude, Kelly, Nick and Wendy, inadvertently cause the death of their friend Robin Hammond (Bourne) during a game in an abandoned school. Six years after that incident, all four students are enrolled in high school and readying themselves for prom night, when each receives threatening phone calls from an unseen person. Could it be Mr. Sykes (Silverman), the creepy school groundskeeper, Leonard Mirch, a sex offender who was wrongly accused of Robin’s death, local thug Lou (Mucci), or someone who witnessed what the foursome did on that terrible day years earlier?

Caught in the crossfire is the principal’s daughter and Robin’s sister, Kim (Curtis). As the night goes by, her friends are murdered one by one, and there is a terrible decapitation leading up to the coronation

of prom king and queen...

COMMENTARY: Paul Lynch's better-than-average slasher film *Prom Night* opens with a cockeyed view of an abandoned school as seen reflected in broken glass strewn on the ground. The strange view of the dilapidated building is an immediate indicator that the world in the film is off-kilter and that the central location, a school, will prove to be a place of terror.

Children play inside the school, repetitiously taunting "Killers are coming" and "The killer is going to get you" to a terrified little girl, and indeed this forecast is a kind of prophecy for all involved, since a killer will be coming after them ... in a school ... one day. It's all part of that slasher film paradigm ingredient, the crime in the past, the accidental murder of an innocent girl, Robin Ann Hammond. This act is the crucial transgression against morality which causes all the later horror in the film.

The organizing principle in *Prom Night*, so critical to the success of a slasher film, is the high school dance. *A la Carrie*, rituals like the crowning of the prom queen and king will be important. That means that, in a pinch, the director can quick cut from spurting red blood to a big bowl of red fruit punch. The organizing principle also provides the venue for the requisite useless authority figure, in this case Mr. Hammond, the principal, played by Leslie Nielsen, whose presence as a Hollywood oldtimer gives the film that important veneer of respectability. Because a slasher film can never have enough of a good thing, the local cops in the film double as useless authority too, out on a wild goose chase hunting an "escaped lunatic."

The organizing principle of a prom also gives the film its considerable victim base: hot-to-trot, attractive students out to have a good time, screw around and smoke pot. Vice, vice and more vice. The same organizing idea provides the film its climactic locale: a dance floor where (in a stunning *coup de grâce*) a severed head rolls up between disco dances.

True to its slasher paradigm origin, *Prom Night* features several red herrings, characters who could conceivably be the killer, but ultimately are not. They include the creepy school groundskeeper, Mr. Sykes, and a recently released sex offender, Leonard Murch. Several hoodlums even show up at one point, and suspicion is cast in their direction. Also, what's up with Kim's disassociated mother, played by Antoinette Bower? Could she have snapped and become a killer herself? The movie even briefly entertains that notion.

Prom Night keeps audiences guessing about the identity of the killer until the big denouement, and this success is one of the prime reasons the film works: It misdirects in efficient, if not entirely artful fashion.

In terms of the uniformed killer, *Prom Night* gives the horror genre a doozy. His weapon is an axe, and his costume is an all-black jumpsuit and sleek ski mask. Referencing *When a Stranger Calls* and forecasting *Scream*, the telephone turns out to be one of the killer's most important tools. What differentiates *Prom Night*'s killer a bit from the murderous pack is that he is lithe and sprite rather than lumbering and huge. He moves fast ... and that's scary.

Jamie Lee Curtis plays the film's final girl, and other than Heather Langenkamp or Ashley Laurence, she's absolutely the tops at this kind of thing, projecting innocence, competence, decency and horror in all the right proportions. *Prom Night* benefits enormously from Curtis's presence, catapulting the film into the higher echelon of *Halloween* knock-offs ... though if truth be told, the film is perhaps a notch below *Terror Train*, her next slasher, creatively.

One example of Curtis's seemingly effortless skill in this type of role is on display in *Prom Night*'s climax as her character, Kim, recognizes the uniformed killer. The revelation of who that killer is shocks her—and without actually revealing his/her identity—Curtis's eyes and facial expression beautifully telegraph it. A reveal would have done the trick, or perhaps a long, lingering shout-out of the killer's name, but Curtis manages it more adroitly. Her pained look, her glare reveals the killer without words, and without a doubt.

On the down side, *Prom Night* also features a sequence the actress must look back upon with a wince. There's a long disco sequence wherein Kim goes all dance fever on the disco floor in a pink, baggy dress. Her big hairstyle, the wretched costume, the disco music ... it's all early 1980s cheese whiz. And absolutely humiliating.

Prom Night isn't a long film, but it takes its time to achieve its effects. The film establishes a nice, playful relationship between Kim and her brother. And director Lynch doesn't rush to the prom set piece, either. In fact, he doesn't get to the main event for fifty-two minutes, and that's all to the good, because the characters have by then been established. Some less skilled moviemakers would have started the dance ten minutes in and had characters dispatched at regular intervals throughout. Lynch is more restrained and—especially for a slasher film—his movie even boasts a little elegance. The conclusion, which is a shocker second only to *Sleepaway Camp*, also actually

generates some pathos and remorse too.

They say that prom night is the most important night in a girl's life. For Jamie Lee Curtis's character in this film, that turns out to be true, but not for the reason the audience suspects.

Saturn 3



Critical Reception

"This film decided to imitate *Alien* ... substituting a giant horny robot that appeared copied from the pages of *Gray's Anatomy*, and cost \$1 million to construct.... Harvey Keitel gives the film's only memorable performance..."—Douglas Menville and R. Reginald, *Futurevisions: The New Golden Age of The Science Fiction Film*, A Greenbriar Book, 1985, pages 95–96.

"The film's best performance comes from Keitel as the deranged scientist who brings a brutish credibility to his dreams of creating a super-race of robots.... The film's one interesting ploy is the idea, little followed up, of a robot assuming the personality of its creator."—Phil Hardy, *The Film Encyclopedia Volume II: Science Fiction*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984, page 363.

"All the ancillary stuff here is far more fascinating than the main plotline (Keitel and his robot), which is absurd. But I'm intrigued by the little society that Fawcett and Douglas have created for themselves on their remote posting—all the little hints about sexuality and recreational pharmaceuticals and ignoring briefings from Earth suggest a deeper drama that is never explored. Still, this flick has one of the all-time great bad-movie lines: Keitel's pass at Fawcett: 'You have a great body, may I use it?'"—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher* (www.flickfilosopher.com)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Farrah Fawcett (Alex); Kirk Douglas (Major Adam); Harvey Keitel (Captain James/Benson); Ed Bishop (Survey 19).

CREW: Lord Grade, in association with Elliott Kastner Presents a Stanley Donen Film. *Executive Producer:* Martin Starger. *Music:* Elmer Bernstein. *Screenplay by:* Martin Amis. *Story by:* John Barry. *Associate Producer:* Eric Rattray. *Director of Photography:* Billy Williams.

Production Designer: Stuart Craig. *Film Editor:* Richard Marden. *Special Effects:* Roy Field, Wally Veevers, Peter Parks, Colin Chilvers. *Costume Designer:* Anthony Mendleson. *Stunt Arranger:* Roy Scammel. *Produced and Directed by:* Stanley Donen. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You have a great body. May I use it?”—Captain Benson (Harvey Keitel) propositions the lovely Alex (Farrah Fawcett) in Stanley Donen’s *Saturn 3*.

SYNOPSIS: Aboard a spaceship, the psychotic Captain Benson (Harvey Keitel) murders Captain James and replaces him on a mission to the Experimental Food Research Station on Saturn 3 during a 22-day eclipse and communications black-out known as “Shadow Lock.”

There, the captain provides “help” for two isolated scientists working on feeding a starving, polluted and overpopulated Earth, Major Adam (Douglas) and his young romantic partner, the beautiful and innocent Alex (Fawcett). The so-called help comes in the form of a humanoid robot named Hector, the first in the new Demi-God series, an intelligent machine with brain tissue that can also receive direct input from a human brain.

While receiving direct input from the unstable Benson, Hector records the captain’s feelings of intense lust for Alex, and consequently mimics them. Before long, the robot has gone on a killing spree, turning on his mentor and terrorizing Adam and Alex. But the robot doesn’t understand the human concept of sacrifice, and that is Adam’s only weapon against Hector.

COMMENTARY: Produced in the wake of *Alien*’s success, *Saturn 3* was savagely reviewed upon its theatrical release, and widely considered a bomb. Yet, on its own terms, and as a kind of futuristic *Frankenstein* myth coupled with the story of Adam and Eve, *Saturn 3* remains interesting, suspenseful and even sort of fun.

Named after the great Trojan Prince beaten by Achilles outside the walls of Troy, the robot Hector represents the film’s embodiment of the classic Frankenstein Monster, a lumbering monstrosity given life by a mad scientist, here essayed by an over-dubbed Harvey Keitel (playing Captain James). Hector has been created to glorify James, to prove to the skeptical (and off-screen) others with whom he works that he isn’t insane. Thus, like Frankenstein himself, there’s a certain degree of vanity involved in the genesis of this new life. But more significant is Hector’s biology. This Demi-God class robot is a

combination of metallic spare parts and “pure brain tissue” grown in a lab. Like the Frankenstein Monster, Hector has the interesting combination of a fully formed (or adult), powerful physicality, and a naive, almost child-like intellect. Unfortunately for Hector, his teacher is the insane James, and like any student, he comes to emulate his instructor.

Of course, going back to 1968 and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one might also be tempted to gaze upon Hector as HAL’s child; one with a menacing physicality to go with the former’s computer brain. In the Kubrick film, however, one never knows why HAL goes insane and murders the crew of the *Discovery*. The reasons for Hector’s instability are plain in *Saturn 3*, and they reflect the Frankenstein myth. James, like Victor, is a bad father. One who—through his own intrinsic psychological flaws—overreached.

That is the idea so powerful rendered in *Frankenstein*: a scientist overreaching, going beyond man’s domain and, in the end, building a monster. That idea is taken intact to inform *Saturn 3*, and the film’s literary genesis as a Frankenstein-type story grants it a literary bent that makes it more than just a simple “robot on the loose”—type movie. After all, many still believe that man shouldn’t “tamper in God’s domain,” and as mankind reaches the stars and makes even more tantalizing discoveries, that fear will remain.

But *Saturn 3* fascinates in the way it combines the Frankenstein theme with the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. In the Old Testament, God creates Adam and Eve and provides them with a glorious Paradise in Eden. This couple wants for nothing, until a serpent enters the Garden and tantalizes Eve with the apple from the tree of knowledge.

This simple story is re-cast in futuristic, technological terms here with a character named, of course, Major Adam (Kirk Douglas) living in bliss with his lover, Alex (Farrah Fawcett). Their facility is an Experimental Food Research Station with plenty of greenery in abundance, a hydroponics bay that could easily be interpreted as a technological or futuristic garden. More to the point, the film defines the lives of Adam and Alex as one of unending bliss. Their facility is like a spa. They exercise regularly, jogging the curving, empty corridors, and live in love and peace, sheltered away from the modern technological world. Alex herself is a total innocent, never having been to Earth, and knowing nothing of its decadent customs.

Then the Serpent(s), Captain James and Hector, arrive in this technologically sustained, hermetically sealed garden. It is not an

apple that James offers Alex, but lustful sex and drugs, the latter in the form of something called a Blue Dreamer. He awakens in Alex the realization that she has lived a sheltered life, and spawns in her the desire to eventually see Earth, which Adam encourages. "On Earth, we use our bodies to help us feel pleasure," James informs her, sharing something of the world he knew; a world heretofore alien to Alex.



An aerobic work-out gone terribly wrong? Nope, the Demi-God robot Hector attacks the lovely Alex (Farrah Fawcett) in the "Paradise Lost" story, *Saturn 3* (1980).

At the end of *Saturn 3*, following Adam's death, Alex does leave the sealed-up paradise, boards a spaceship and heads for Earth, and her ejection from the Garden is complete.

The mythological underpinnings in *Saturn 3*, which also include an understanding of Hector's name (he drags his dead maker, James, down a corridor, not unlike the fashion in which Achilles would have dragged Hector around Troy), serve to make it an effective horror film, and one more deep than one might expect. But horror movies don't only operate on the rarified level of subtext. They are scary when elements such as story, location, texture and pacing come together in an extraordinary fashion.

On that front, *Saturn 3* also succeeds, at least to the degree of a positive recommendation. The film makes the clever move of isolating its characters within a trap within a trap within a trap. They're in a hermetically sealed facility on an inhospitable planet, during an eclipse or "shadow" that lasts for twenty-two days. Thus, again like Adam and Eve, they really are in a "bubble" with no others. The outside world doesn't exist for them while this story happens, and that means there is no chance, no availability of a rescue operation.

The film also presents a powerful villain. Hector's an interesting figure because the brain-to-brain connection between Hector and James has passed on all of the human's psychosis. Although Hector may not have genitalia, it is clear that he is horny for Alex, a randy, psychotic robot. And frankly, how often do you see one of those in a horror film?

The sets, special effects and costumes are all top-notch for 1980 vintage too, though it's tempting to laugh at them given today's advanced computer generated imagery. Perhaps the best aspect of the film is how Adam's fear about outside contamination comes true. He has set up—the word paradise springs to mind—a perfect little world for himself. While Earth starves, he has plenty of food. While lust and casual sex dominate amongst his people far away, he has found a perfect, innocent mate who truly loves him. But when James comes, the machines—and human weakness—take over. On Earth, Adam would have feared being at the mercy of the society, of government, of his peers. Suddenly, in his perfect world, he is at the mercy of Hector, a psychotic who can control every aspect of the environment. He can make Alex and Adam cold, hot—and he can cut off the air. Adam is made slave to the machine, and that's a metaphor for the

very life he was fleeing, one of regimented control, where he was but a cog in the wheel. That's why he fights Hector to the death, because he too has been thrown out of his paradise with the coming of this interloper.

Saturn 3 features some ghoulish, clever touches. There's a moment during one robot attack when the audience can see that Hector has some bloody flesh stuck on his pincers. It looks like meat, and that's an explicit reminder of the gulf between flesh and steel, the very gulf that his lust makes Hector so desperate to cross. And the film's final message, that the concept of self-sacrifice is ultimately that which separates a human soul from a machine's artificial intelligence, is one that lingers after a viewing. Hopefully, that's the message Alex can take back to Earth when she disembarks from that spaceship; that mankind—in his ability to put the welfare of those he loves before himself—can conquer the machines, overpopulation, lust and the other bugaboos that threaten to destroy a species in crisis.

The Shining

★★★★

Critical Reception

"At its most convincing, *The Shining* is not a portrait of a madman or of a haunted house, but as Kubrick himself told an interviewer the story of one man's family quietly going insane together."—Morris Dickstein, "The Aesthetics of Fright," *American Film*, September 1980, page 58.

"*The Shining* ... fits the Kubrick mold ... mesmerizingly lovely.... Yet, like *A Clockwork Orange* or *2001: A Space Odyssey*, this is a movie that barely makes sense upon examination.... If Mr. Kubrick's things that go bump in the night have a way of bumping into each other, so what? The richness of his work is something rare."—Janet Maslin, "Flaws Don't Dim *The Shining*," *The New York Times*, June 8, Section 2, page 1.

"Much of the problem with this slick, nasty movie is that Kubrick hasn't decided what it's about. Is it a tale of human evil, supernatural evil, or both?... Jack Nicholson is the only one on screen who's worth watching, and his brilliant, unsettling performance is nonetheless too baroque to be engaging."—Stephen Schiff, *Glamour*, August 1980, pages 40–41.

“The flamboyant filmmaking does not function to communicate King’s ideas, but glides around them, just like Danny’s tricycle glides around the maze-like corridors of the hotel: moving fast but going nowhere. It rates, therefore, as style without substance, technique presented on attention-getting level. There is no content, in terms of character or drama, but rather the form becomes (for Kubrick, and those who can stomach his approach to film) the content.”—Douglas Brode, *The Films of Jack Nicholson*, A Citadel Press Book, 1996, page 208.

“Why would Kubrick willfully make an unscary horror movie? It doesn’t make sense.”—Henry Brommell, “The Dimming of Stanley Kubrick,” *The Atlantic*, August 1980, page 83.

“...a horror-fest, stunningly photographed, pervaded with chilling images, and dominated by Jack Nicholson’s diabolically brilliant performance. The impact of the film is intensified with masterly skill by the mounting interaction of physical and psychic horror.”—Harry M. Geduld, “Mazes and Murder,” *The Humanist*, September/October 1980, page 49.

“A genre piece like this can survive without frissons, if slow inexorable menace is supplied instead. Yet throughout, the rhythms Kubrick imposes on each scene are too flaccid and attenuated for that ... and even the movie’s climactic set piece ... runs on at least as twice as long as it should.”—Stephen Harvey, “Shining It Isn’t,” *Saturday Review*, July 1980, page 65.

“Okay, you love this film, but let me tell you why you’re wrong. Stanley Kubrick looked like a total genius when he made *2001* because it was incomprehensible, and we needed an incomprehensible film about space because space is, well, it’s big, and it’s hard to comprehend how big it is. Succinctly, it’s incomprehensible. If that is a filmmaker’s intent, he’s a genius. If it starts becoming a trend in his or her films, you’ve got to start questioning the filmmaker’s ability to be ... well, comprehensible. I would argue that David Lynch and Stanley Kubrick are charter members in The Emperor’s New Clothes Directors Guild, because they specialize in incomprehensibility, and they’re loved for it.

“I don’t mean to say Lynch and Kubrick are without talent. They’ve both done good, even great films. But you see Kubrick’s *The Shining* and then read Stephen King’s novel, and you’ll see what I’m talking about. There’s beautiful imagery in Kubrick’s film (the opening drive up to the hotel is the scariest part of the film), the crux of King’s plot is in the film, and then there are a series of bad Kubrick choices. Jack

Nicholson is fun in this movie. His performance has been parodied to death. Sorry, folks, it ain't scary. If Anthony Hopkins had played Jack Torrence? What a different film it would have been! Ultimately, King's story is about an ordinary guy's fall into madness. I mean, look at Nicholson's eyebrows. He doesn't have to fall into madness—a minor stumble and he's offering the Chief a piece of Juicy Fruit between card games with half the cast of *Taxi* for smokes under the watchful eye of Nurse Ratched.

"*The Shining* is debatably King's finest novel and this reviewer read the book after seeing the film. King's story is scary. Kubrick's film is moody and funny and at times, you are concerned for the safety of Shelley Duvall and her son, but it's not scary. Casting Nicholson was not a good idea, and Kubrick spends too much time on back alleys in this tale, attempting to play up the mood of suspense, but not furthering the story. There are nice things in some of his shots—in particular Danny on his little tricycle moving from bare floor to carpeted floor—but this story was exotic enough that it could have benefited from straightforward storytelling. David Cronenberg pulled back his artistic pretensions when he filmed *The Dead Zone*, and it worked well—it stands out as a very un-Cronenberg Cronenberg film, but it worked. Kubrick was Kubrick when he made *The Shining*, and the film suffered for it. It's not without merit by any means, but it isn't nearly as good as some would have you believe. George Romero would have kept you up at night."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

"Simply one of the best haunted house movies of all time. Sure, Stephen King hated this version of his story, but Kubrick added another dimension. Those twin girls in the hallway are one of the creepiest images ever set to celluloid. The only flaw as that Jack didn't make a slow descent into madness—we pretty much knew he was wacked from the first uplifted eyebrow."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jack Nicholson (Jack Torrence); Shelley Duvall (Wendy Torrence); Scatman Crothers (Dick Halloran); Danny Lloyd (Danny); Barry Nelson (Stuart Ullman); Philip Stone (Grady); Joe Turkel (Lloyd); Anne Jackson (Doctor); Tony Burton (Durkin).

CREW: A Stanley Kubrick Film. *Based on the novel by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* Stanley Kubrick, Diane Johnson. *Executive Producer:* Jan Harlan. *Director of Photography:* John Alcott. *Production Design:* Roy

Walker. *Film Editor*: Ray Lovejoy. *Music*: Bela Bartok. *Makeup*: Tom Smith. *Produced and Directed by*: Stanley Kubrick. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 144 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I—and some of the others—have come to believe that your heart isn’t in this. That you don’t have the belly for it.”—A ghostly inhabitant of the Overlook Hotel tells Jack (Jack Nicholson) that he’s something of a disappointment, in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*.

P.O.V.

“Stanley is probably the one director today who has a completely free hand. Whatever you say it’s *always* Stanley’s film. He’s an absolute perfectionist, and he will go on and on until he gets his thoughts and ideas over to you.”³—Ken Adam, production designer on *The Shining*.

SYNOPSIS: Frustrated writer and former alcoholic Jack Torrence (Nicholson) gets a job as the winter caretaker at the imposing Overlook Hotel (reputedly built on an Indian burial ground). The hotel manager, Ullman (Nelson), tells Jack that in 1970 the caretaker, a man named Grady (Stone), axe-murdered his entire family during the winter months after a mental breakdown. Despite this chilling tale, Jack brings his patient wife, Wendy (Duvall), and their troubled young son Danny (Lloyd) up to the isolated hotel for the winter, for five months of seclusion and quiet.

Danny’s imaginary friend Tony has already warned the boy that the place is evil, and shows him a bloody vision of the hotel. Before the hotel cook, O’Halloran (Crothers), leaves for the winter he reveals to Danny that he too shares the gift of insight, which he calls “shining.” He also warns the sensitive boy not to venture for any reason into room 237, where something dark and evil awaits.

As the months pass, Jack begins to grow deranged, alienating himself from his family. Soon, he begins to see a bartender, Lloyd (Turkel), who is either a ghost or a figment of his growing psychosis. Then, even worse, Jack begins to have contact with Grady, the former caretaker who killed his family at the Overlook and who is now urging Jack to kill *his* family.

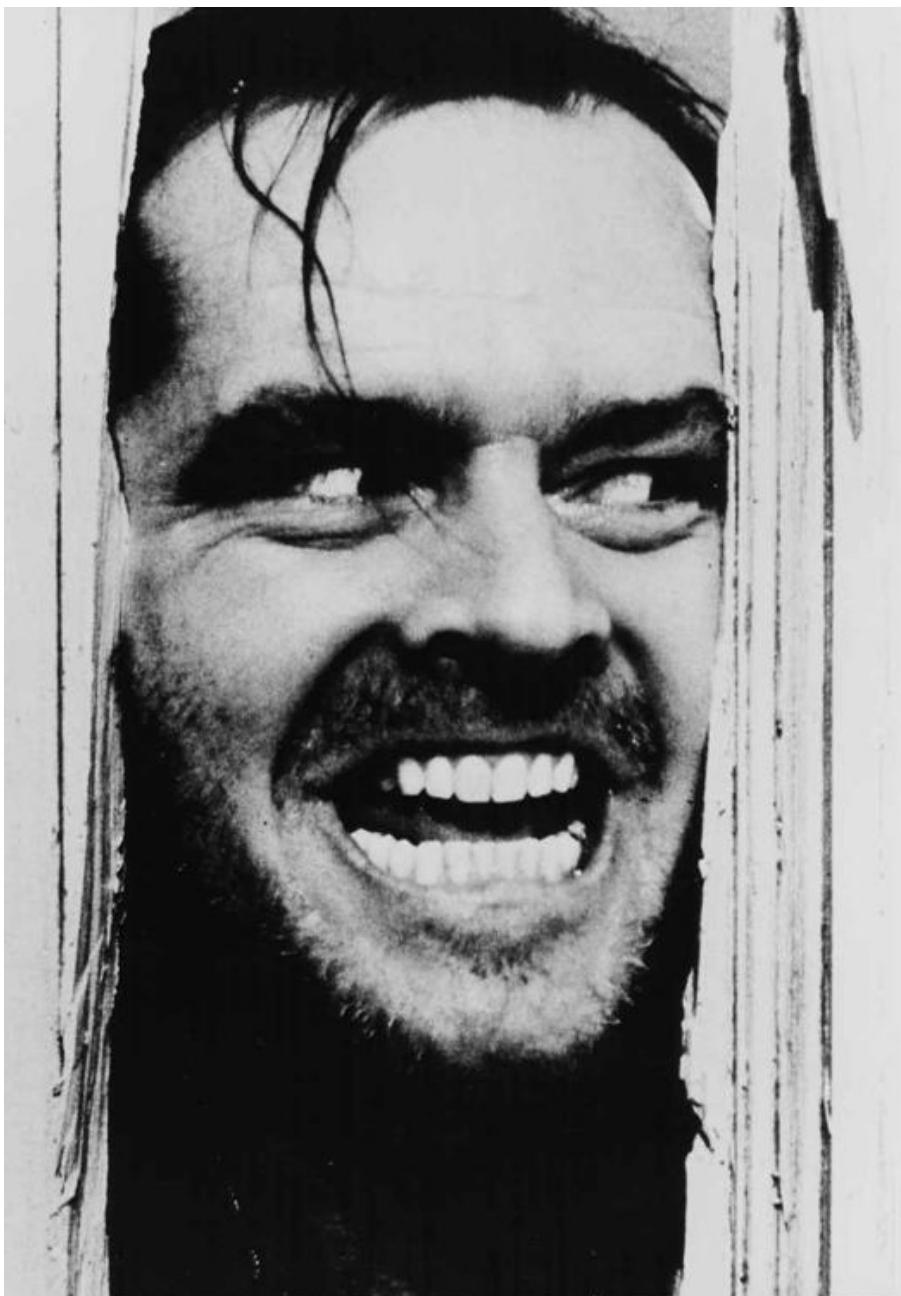
When Jack finally snaps and wields an axe with murderous glee, it is up to Wendy to protect Danny and escape into the blizzard...

COMMENTARY: A frigid gloom and a clinical, cerebral iciness hangs over every minute of Stanley Kubrick’s overlong *The Shining*. This

technically accomplished and much-admired film isn't actually an easy horror to love because there's something dispassionate and intellectual about the terror generated throughout. Based on a novel by Stephen King, *The Shining* moves at a stately, almost glacial pace, and the narrative is fragmented (like Torrence's psyche) into "pieces" by title cards that interrupt the action and momentum.

In essence, *The Shining* charts a descent into one man's corrupted and lunatic mind-state. Jack Torrence's unhinged mental condition is externalized as the hotel's seemingly endless, twisting corridors, and *The Shining* repetitiously charts the loneliness and emptiness of this space. As the audience rides (courtesy of a Steadicam) behind little Danny on his Big Wheel, turning corner after corner, taking turn after turn *ad infinitum*, there's a true sense of isolation and boredom. Thus the reality of life in the Overlook Hotel feels like some unending Möbius Strip, boasting no end and no beginning. People who once lived there, live again as ghosts. People there now, like Jack, existed in the 1920s but have come 'round again. And so time has no meaning.

The Shining even ends on this note of maze-like, unnavigable mental space, as Jack Torrence, now a full-bore madman, dies in the hotel's hedge maze. The film's climax reveals that even Jack himself can't find his way clear of madness. The turns and wrinkles of the Hedge Maze might as well be the wrinkles of his brain. They're inescapable.



Heeeeeeee's Johnny! Jack Torrence (Jack Nicholson) goes stark, raving bonkers in Stanley Kubrick's controversial horror film, *The Shining* (1980).

The brilliance inherent in *The Shining* is the manner in which this cold,

calculating film ruthlessly and heartlessly charts Jack's collapse. His typewriter is like a dead weight to his ankle as he tries (and fails) to create a novel and as the days and months pass he becomes increasingly disconnected from his family. And strung-out too: scraggly and unkempt. He physically and mentally degenerates to the point where he converses with phantasms and threatens his family with bloody murder.

What's not nearly so satisfying about the film is that director Kubrick would really like to play the story both ways, which is a symptom of a lack of discipline, of all things. For instance, *The Shining* would be a stronger film if most of the supernatural material were excised. Danny could still be borderline psychic, and Torrence could still encounter "ghosts" who might merely be hallucinations. Yet if handled with ambiguity, *The Shining* could track cleanly as a story of a man who falls apart because of cabin fever, because of an isolating winter alone in that vast hotel.

Yet *The Shining* can't make that case in any shape or form because at one point during the action a ghost releases Torrence from incarceration in a freezer (where Wendy has stowed him). This is demonstrable evidence that the ghosts are no mere hallucinations, but self-directing entities.

Also, the final punchline is a zoom in on a photograph of the hotel staff from the 1920s which reveals Torrence—or at least a Torrence lookalike—as caretaker in those days. This makes Torrence a literal reincarnation of a previous caretaker, and seals the supernatural deal. There's no doubt left; there are ghosts in that hotel.

The inclusion of the material cementing the case for ghosts weakens the film substantially. As many critics have pointed out, Jack Nicholson is a decidedly strange-seeming bird with those arched eyebrows, that wide smile and some of his insane mannerisms. The film could still work in terms of suspense if Jack broke over time. Indeed, people would see it coming and, like Hitchcock's famous time bomb theory, wonder how and when he is going to explode. Instead, the idea that ghosts are "changing" Jack from a relatively normal sane man to a raving lunatic is lost since Nicholson is already clearly halfway down that road. In other words: The casting works if the movie's about a ticking time bomb, an abusive, self-involved "bad" father who can't stand the strain of winter. But as a nice guy manipulated by ghosts, the casting is totally and completely wrong.

Alternately, remove the supernatural overtones and *The Shining* loses

some of its most potent and terrifying imagery. The little English twins standing together, speaking in perfect unison, for example, are a perfect example of a frightful supernatural specter. Or the hallways flooded with blood. Or the ghoulish old hag in Room 237. These images would have to be changed or modified to excise the supernatural and then *The Shining* wouldn't shine.

The flaws in *The Shining* all arise from the script, not from Kubrick's execution. Yet, separated from the big, flawed moments, *The Shining* is a primal scream about domestic unrest. It glitters with rage and bitterness, and features one of the cinema's all-time classic "bad" fathers in Nicholson's Torrence. His mental abuse of Wendy (whom he terms "the old sperm bank upstairs") and Danny is stunning and frightfully wrought. His physical violence even more so. When Jack takes the axe out and proclaims "Here's Johnny," the film comes to mad, perturbed life.



Or he'll huff, and he'll puff, and he'll chop the door down ... with a pick-axe. An excruciatingly scary moment from *The Shining*, starring Shelley Duvall.

Within the narrow confines of a story about domestic disaster, the disintegration of a family unit, *The Shining* hits every note it aims for. “I dreamed that I killed you and Danny ... I cut you up into little pieces,” Jack warns Wendy, giving voice to his increasingly homicidal thoughts. This dream is the one that mankind fears, has *always* feared—that of a father abdicating his responsibility and madly killing those he has promised to protect and nurture. Jack is a weak man, a former alcoholic, and more than that, a frustrated artist. His creativity seems to live only in the presence of ghosts, and killing his family may be the thing that unplugs his writer’s block ... which is memorably depicted as Wendy reads his manuscript. His great American novel is nothing but countless variations of the phrase “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

Some have read deep meaning into *The Shining* and frankly, it stands up to multiple schools of thought because—as in all great art—the artist has left some gaps and invited the viewer to fill them. Some scholars see the film as an indictment of America and its cartoon culture. Scholars John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh write:

While the novel depicts Jack and Wendy as victims of a dysfunctional family situation, Kubrick satirically views them as part of a culture of grotesque comic-book banality. Far from achieving his dream of becoming the Great American writer of his era (rather than the playwright of the original novel), Jack becomes a de-humanized “Big Bad Wolf.”⁴

Flo Leibowitz and Lynn Jeffress, reviewing the film in *Film Quarterly*, unearth a socio-political subtext in *The Shining*. They suggest:

[I]t becomes apparent that Jack is caretaker not only of the hotel but also of the American dream, depicted in the film as empty and haunted. This illusion is initially seductive, but once embraced, it shows itself rotting and destructive—like the mysterious woman in room 237. The paradox at the heart of the dream is evoked by the Torrence family ensconced like royalty in the empty Overlook Hotel, enchanted by the illusion of ownership, while in fact they are merely employees, living in the

If anything, the varied critical responses to *The Shining* reveal what a problematic if brilliant film Kubrick's effort remains. Dissecting and analyzing it is like chasing one's own tail.

For some reason, I'm again reminded of the Mobius Strip. That's the only way I can understand the film: as a snapshot of a madness. It neither begins nor ends, and is represented by desolate, long spans of hallways and corridors. Twisted mental space is reflected by isolated, hotel space.

From Uranus, Cronos and Oedipus to Jack Torrence and Freddy Krueger, the bad father is a recurring image in literature and film. There were bad, mad fathers at the Overlook before Torrence (Grady murdered his girls, remember), and one feels as *The Shining* ends that the cycle will repeat anew.

The Shining may be no more or no less than the story of one notable bad father, one whose frustration to be seen as an "artist" blinds him to his responsibility as the creator of a life, a child. Not incidentally, this is the defining crisis of the 1980s, seen in horror films as diverse as *Altered States* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986), *The Stepfather* (1987), and *Parents* (1989). Patriarchy is in shambles and suddenly, Father no longer knows best. Remove all the sound and fury in Stanley Kubrick's film, and that's the idea that resonates ... and shines.

The Silent Scream

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rebecca Balding (Scotty Parker); Cameron Mitchell (Lt. Sandy McGiver); Avery Schreiber (Sgt. Manny); Barbara Steele (Victoria Engels); Steve Doubet (Jack); Brad Rearden (Mason Engels) John Widelock (Peter Ranson); Yvonne De Carlo (Mrs. Engles); Juli Andelman (Doris); Jack Stryker (Police Chief); Thelma Pelish (Housing Lady); Tina Taylor (Victoria at 6); Annabella Price (TV Rape Victim); Joe Pronto (TV Rapist).

CREW: A Denny Harris Film. *Casting:* Leslie Zurla. *Directors of Photography:* Michael D. Murphy, David Shore. *Film Editor:* Edward Salier. *Production Design:* Christopher Henry. *Music:* Roger Kellaway.

Associate Producer: Leslie Zurla. *Executive Producer:* Denny Harris. *Producers:* Jim Wheat, Ken Wheat. *Written by:* Ken Wheat, Jim Wheat, Wallace C. Bennett. *Directed by:* Denny Harris. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

P.O.V.

"I do admit that when I was tied up in the closet, I was thinking, 'Damn, I hope we don't have an earthquake right now.'"—Rebecca Balding, *The Silent Scream*'s final girl, Scotty, recollects shooting the film's climax.

SYNOPSIS: A female college student named Scotty (Balding) rents a room at a strange old Victorian mansion overlooking the sea with three other co-eds, Doris (Andelman), Peter (Widelock) and Jack (Doubet). The landlord is a meek young man, Mason Engels (Rearden), who lives under the thumb of his wicked, secretive and disapproving mother (De Carlo). One night, a drunk Peter is brutally stabbed to death on the beach, and the police, led by Lt. McGiver (Mitchell), investigate the terrible crime. Before long, the other residents at the Engels manor begin to disappear, killed off one at a time by a bizarre, unseen assailant. Scotty survives and learns that Mason and his dear old mum are protecting Mason's insane sister, Victoria (Steele), a knife-wielding maniac.

When Victoria flips out and threatens Scotty, Mason flips out too and dresses in the military uniform of his dead father, and shoots his mother in the back. Tied in a closet and forced to watch the final confrontation, Scotty witnesses up-close a most peculiar and deadly brand of family dysfunction.

COMMENTARY: The first rule they should teach at landlord school is not to rent out rooms in your boarding house if one of your family members is a psychotic killer. But that teensy familial issue doesn't stop the creepy Engels family in *The Silent Scream* from opening their gorgeous, hill top home to a group of unfortunate college students, led by the feisty and comely Rebecca Balding as Scotty.

Hitchcock's *Psycho* is probably the granddaddy, progenitor and artistic pinnacle of films like *The Silent Scream* (and others eighties example of the subgenre, including *Funeral Home* [1982], and even—to a degree—*Motel Hell* [1980]). In this brand of horror film, an innocent interloper from outside, often a female student or tourist, stumbles upon a twisted family dynamic and learns a terrible and dark secret about the family's past. She may survive, but the cost to her sanity

will be great...

Here, the story is simply that the character played by Barbara Steele, Victoria, is stark raving nuts, and Mason—the so-called sane sibling—isn't wrapped too tightly either, obsessed with the father he never knew. Their mother, played by Yvonne De Carlo, is an enabler extraordinary, and that means protecting Victoria's secret at all costs. Consequently, all of Scotty's friends are murdered in gruesome fashion, as one would expect of a slice'n'dice movie, and she—our final girl—alone survives to tell the tale.

Naturally, the police, represented by the ubiquitous Cameron Mitchell, arrive much too late to be of any real help to the beleaguered heroine, though *The Silent Scream* artistically opens in *media res*, with the policemen already arriving at the Engels house—in slow motion—and discovering the aftermath of the massacre.

In movies such as *The Silent Scream*, the overriding metaphor or artistic principle seems to be that the dark corners of “this old house” represent the twisted corridors of the killer’s mind, and indeed, *The Silent Scream* treads that territory pretty well. At one point, Scotty is observed by the murderous Victoria from a vent grate, a “hidden” place in the house. In another moment, Scotty stumbles upon Victoria’s inner sanctum after discovering the crawlspace, and is consequently attacked there in a moment of high tension. She is down the rabbit hole, as it were, at this point, facing a madwoman in the recesses of an edifice beautiful on the outside, but tricky on the inside. Don’t worry, be afraid, okay?

The Silent Scream also attempts to gain some thematic traction from the intersection of sex and violence. While Scotty and Jack get it on in the bedroom, their lovemaking is cross-cut with images of Doris, their buddy, getting hacked to death in the basement by Victoria. Released from an asylum after years of incarceration (and an attempt to hang herself), Victoria has deep-seated problems that relate back to a bad experience with a former boyfriend. Turns out he jilted her for another woman, and she took up the knife...

None of this is terribly original material, but the movie’s score adds nicely to the feelings of mounting tension, and the climax is a humdinger, with Mason and Victoria clashing while Scotty is tied inside a closet nearby, forced to watch the family drama play out.

CLOSE-UP: Remembering The Silent Scream: Rebecca Balding, who starred in TV’s *Soap* and recently played a recurring role on the WB’s

Charmed, portrayed Scotty in *The Silent Scream*, and I asked her how she came to the role.

"I auditioned for it," the actress relates. "I got it and turned it down because I was doing *The Lou Grant Show*. I had the lead on *The Lou Grant Show*—the hour-long drama they did—but after the third episode, they let me go.

"So the first thing I did—after I stopped crying—was call my agent and say 'Do they still want me for *Silent Scream*?' And they did, so I went in. It was a *very* low-budget film.

"The director actually had his own commercial house and he wanted to direct movies, not commercials," Balding explains. "So during shooting, he was cutting at night. Then, when he had the rough cut done, he would take people off the street and show it to them and invite their opinions."

And what were his conclusions about the movie?

"He eventually ended up re-writing and re-shooting the whole thing, and only using three or four people from the original cast," Balding relates. "Remember the Unknown Comic? He was in the first version. Denny probably only used ten percent of the original footage and then went out and shot a new script. And it was much better...."

At this point, I had to ask, how the second version of the script was an improvement over the original material.

"I honestly can't remember what the first one was like," Balding admits. "The first time we shot it, we actually used the interior of that house; or at least the living room. But then Denny built us sets on his sound stage."

And any memories of being tied in that closet while Mason and Victoria had it out?

"Well, my ribs got pretty chafed," Balding laughs. "And I had karo syrup up my nose...."

Terror Train

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“...sleek and eerie...”—Richard Corliss, *Time*, November 3, 1980, page 105.

“...better than most of its kind.”—John Pym, Editor, *Time Out Film Guide, Seventh Edition*, Penguin Books, 1999.

“During Jamie Lee’s reign as Scream Queen in Hollywood, she made some good films—*Halloween* and *The Fog*—and some not so good ones—*Prom Night* and *Halloween II*. *Terror Train* fits somewhere in the middle. It’s a little dated but it’s not boring, Curtis is effective in the film, illusionist David Copperfield adds something to the movie, and Ben Johnson is good as the benevolent conductor. Not as forgettable as some. What was I talking about?”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ben Johnson (Conductor); Jamie Lee Curtis (Alana); Hart Bochner (Doc); Sandee Currie (Mitchy); Timothy Webber (Mo); Derek MacKinnon (Kenny Hampson); Anthony Sherwood (Jackson); Joy Boushel (Pat); D.D. Winters (Merry); Greg Swanson (Class President); Howard Busgang (Ed); David Copperfield (The Magician); Steve Michaels (Brakeman); Victor Knight (Engineer); Don Lemoureux (Shovels); Charles Biddles, Sr. (Chief Porter); Elizabeth Cholette (Dispatcher).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox Presents an Astral Bellevue Path Production. *Presented by:* Harold Greenberg and Sandy Howard. *Film Editor:* Anne Henderson. *Music:* John Mills-Cockell. *Production Design:* Glynn Bydwell. *Director of Photography:* John Alcott. *Director of Dialogue:* Caryl Wickman. *Executive Producer:* Lamar Card. *Written by:* T.Y. Drake. *Produced by:* Harold Greenberg. *Costume Designer:* Pam Hadfield. *Casting:* Ingrid Fischer, Anna St. Jones. *Illusions Created by:* David Copperfield. *Directed by:* Roger Spottiswoode. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Led by an obnoxious medical student, Doc (Bochner), a group of fraternity kids play a nasty prank on a shy boy named Kenny Hampson (MacKinnon) one New Year’s Eve.

Three years later, Doc and his friends graduate from college and plan their futures, but on a specially booked train ride-party, a mysterious figure from their past begins to kill the fraternity members.

One young woman, Alana (Curtis) was part of the ill-franked prank three years earlier and suspects she knows who is behind the killings,

but what appears to be—and what is—are confused during a long night of magic, illusion, and mayhem. As the killer zeroes in on Alana, a kindly train conductor (Johnson) tries to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, unaware that his prime suspect, a magician (Copperfield), may not be the culprit...

COMMENTARY: Many horror movies are inspired by an act of cruelty that causes the victim to snap. *Terror Train*'s deadly preamble sets in motion a night of terrifying revenge that moves at the pace of a roaring locomotive, and that's one reason the film works so effectively.

Often lumped with *Halloween*, *Halloween II* and *Prom Night* because it stars scream queen Jamie Lee Curtis and came out between 1978–80, *Terror Train* is actually a rather superior horror film of the slasher vein because it understands the trick to producing a good film in this paradigm: A filmmaker must take the rigid structure of the slasher film and modify it to feature a surprise or two.

The thrill of a horror picture like *Terror Train* is the shrewd manner in which it plays against audience expectations; the sense that the slasher film paradigm gives it parameters which it can then undercut, subvert, and if needs be, violate.

For instance, the organizing principle is an important component of the slasher milieu. The organizing principle isn't just a location, but a set of factors that grant the film everything from its victim pool to props to its back-story. You'd think that a "train" would be the primary organizing principle of a film called *Terror Train*. And indeed, the train is an important factor, giving the audience specific characters (like an engineer), and the setting (a party on a passenger train). But interestingly, the "train" setting is only a piece of *Terror Train*'s organizing principle; and not even the most significant one.

The more important organizing principle is actually magic, or the often undetectable gulf between reality and illusion (a common 1980s theme, as the introduction of this text points out in relation to Ronald Reagan and the chasm between his policies and his rhetoric).

In other words, characters live and die in *Terror Train* based, in large part, on how they perceive the reality or non-reality around them. If the would-be victims can see through the illusion, they tend to survive. If they can't do so, they die. It's as simple as that, but this approach makes *Terror Train* a more complex and layered film than the average slasher picture. Suspense is generated because the

audience is never certain if it is being fooled, or its eyes are registering the truth.

Gaze more closely at magic or illusion vs. reality as the core conceit of *Terror Train*. To commence with, there's the prank (another common element of the slasher paradigm: the transgression). Dorky Kenny can't perceive that Alana and her buddies are having him on, and basically, they trick him into nearly bedding a corpse, rather than the lovely Alana. Kenny doesn't see or even detect the trap. He sees the illusion (Alana), rather than the reality—a ghoulish prank. This crime in the past not only makes the unstable Kenny snap, it gives him the *modus operandi* by which he will destroy his enemies: fooling them with illusions.

When Kenny, the stalker, decides to execute his revenge, he uses the illusion provided by a costume party to replace an anonymous partygoer and thus board the train. He kills one of the graduates, steals his costume, and none of the other party-goers are aware of the replacement. People talk to him, and accept his silence or odd behavior as too much weed. So they mistakenly still believe their eyes, the illusion that the man in the Groucho Marx costume is a buddy, not an enemy.

Later, Kenny repeats the same trick, replacing Jackson (in a lizard costume) to commit further acts of violence against those who wronged him. Finally, when it comes time to get the orchestrator of the deadly preamble, the arrogant Doc (Bochner), Doc is unable to detect that he is not part of a joke himself. He has mistaken reality for an illusion (a practical joke like the one he played on Kenny) and so he too dies.

There's a doozy of a red herring in *Terror Train*. When the fraternity gang realizes it didn't hire a magician to play on the train, Alana and others, including the engineer, suspect that the Magician is, in fact, the murderer. This all kind of makes sense, of course, because he is a master of reality and illusion. At its most basic level, magic is all about deception, about leading the eyes to one destination while the hands are doing something different, unnoticed. So it's a logical leap in a film about reality and illusion that a magician could be the killer.

What's so brilliant about *Terror Train* is the manner in which the killer is actually on stage—in plain view—with the Magician whenever he is performing. Kenny has changed into a “female” (another illusion) and is serving as the Magician's assistant. So, mimicking the gimmick of magic, director Spottiswoode casts audiences' eyes to the illusion

(David Copperfield as the Magician), while the killer (reality) goes unnoticed. Our eyes betray us.

In *Terror Train*'s final chase, reality and illusion have become so utterly confused that Jamie Lee Curtis's character seeks safety by locking herself in a cage in the middle of a fairly large compartment! Usually, a cage serves as a trap; a place where animals are caught. But in this film, the reality might just be that a cage is the only place of safety. It's the uncertainty of illusion and reality that makes this final sequence work, especially with the killer's big "reveal," the illusion of womanhood giving way to the reality that the killer is Kenny, in fact, a man.

It's the role of the final girl in a slasher movie to be more perceptive, more insightful than the other characters about the events going on around her. Interestingly, Alana gets played pretty thoroughly in *Terror Train*, a reflection, perhaps, of her culpability in the original transgression. While it is true that she knows about the killings before anybody else, she still isn't able to ferret out the murderer's identity until the very end.

Terror Train is a slasher movie with a complex structure and thematic unity. The distance between reality and illusion constantly vexes the *dramatis personae* and creates an environment of uncertainty and unpredictability, for the audience as well as the film's protagonists. This allows the killer free rein. As viewers, we begin to question what we see, and the suspense mounts...

The Watcher in the Woods

★ ★

Critical Reception

"I challenge even the most indulgent fan to give a coherent translation of what passes for an explanation at the end."—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*, April 18, 1980, page C19.

"...a muddled disaster ... an attempt at an old-fashioned Gothic horror film, but it was neither fish nor fowl. Most of the horror got left out.... A total waste of such veteran stars as Bette Davis, Carroll Baker and David McCallum."—Douglas Menville and R. Reginald, *Futurevisions: The New Golden Age of The Science Fiction Film*, A Greenbriar Book, 1985, page 105.

"The Watcher in the Woods wastes the talents of Bette Davis and wastes our time with the non-talents of two children who speak in monotones.... This dreary Disney movie may scare some ten-year-old girls who enjoy teenage mysteries, but parents and other adults will be exasperated."—Gene Shalit, *Ladies Home Journal*, July 1980, page 28.

"I could not figure out what audience the film was made for. The plot has no new twist on the haunted English mansion scenario. Bette Davis, as the mother of the hauntee, is not enough to legitimize this horrid horror. As a matter of fact, *The Watcher in the Woods* is best left unwatched."—Bonnie Allen, *Essence*, July 1980, page 17.

"It's standard mystery-suspense stuff done up *a la* Disney, which is to say: glossy-slapdash.... Among the other inanities: the final reel was not finished in time so the film ended with unseemly abruptness for preview audiences and critics—what kind of undisciplined, self-indulgent production sloppiness is this?"—Lawrence J. Quirk, *Bette Davis: Her Films and Career (Revised and Updated)*, Citadel Press, 1985, page 208.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bette Davis (Mrs. Aylwood); Carroll Baker (Mrs. Curtis); David McCallum (Paul Curtis); Lynn-Holly Johnson (Jan Curtis); Kyle Richards (Ellie Curtis); Ian Bannen (John Keller); Richard Pasco (Tom Colley); Frances Cuka (Mary Fleming); Benedict Taylor (Mike Fleming); Eleanor Summerfield (Mrs. Thayer); Georgina Hale (Young Mrs. Aylwoon).

CREW: *Presented by:* Walt Disney Productions. *Production Designer:* Elliot Scott. *Art Director:* Alan Cassie. *Director of Photography:* Alan Hume. *Film Editor:* Geoffrey Foot. *Music Composed and Conducted by:* Stanley Myers. *Co-Producer:* Tom Leetch. *Screenplay by:* Brian Clemens, Harry Spalding, Rosemary Anne Sisson. *From the novel by:* Florence Engel Randall. *Produced by:* Ron Miler. *Final Scene Designed by:* Harrison Ellenshaw. *Visual Effects:* David Mattingly, Dick Kendall, Don Henry. *Special Photographic Effects:* Art Cruickshank, Bob Broughton. *Directed by:* John Hough. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Walt Disney Productions ushers in a new decade of motion picture entertainment with the following invitation to spend ninety minutes on the edge of your seat."—Opening card for the trailer of *The Watcher in the Woods* (1980).

“Something awful happened here. I can feel it. Something awful....”—Jan Curtis (Lynn-Holly Johnson) senses the presence of something bad in *The Watcher in the Woods*.

SYNOPSIS: The Curtis family rents a massive but isolated estate in the English countryside that borders on a patch of dense and mysterious woods. The house's elderly owner, Mrs. Aylwood (Davis), lives alone in a cottage next door and is curious about young Jan Curtis (Johnson), a sensitive teen who reminds her of Karen, the daughter she lost under bizarre and tragic circumstances nearly thirty years ago. Jan and her younger sister Ellie (Richards) come to believe that they are being contacted by a strange presence in the woods, and set out to solve the mystery of Karen's disappearance, which involves a secret society initiation, a country chapel, a solar eclipse, and this strange, unseen “watcher in the woods.”

As another eclipse nears, Jan comes to understand that she can return Karen Aylwood to her pining mother, if she can somehow recreate the bizarre incident that stranded her in another dimension decades ago, and which brought the strange force into our world, where it has been waiting patiently...

COMMENTARY: *Mea culpa.* I first saw *The Watcher in the Woods* when I was ten or eleven years old, and at that age, the movie's mysteries tantalized me. The Gothic house, the missing girl, the dark secret, the conspiracy of silence, the special effects climax, the acknowledgment of an alternate dimension ... it all seemed so curious and fascinating. I don't know how often previously I had seen these elements combined in a single story. To my innocent brain at that age, this represented rather interesting material, and the film stimulated me to learn more about the horror genre. But then again, at that age, I also thoroughly enjoyed *The Black Hole* (a 1979 Walt Disney misfire). I was a kid. What can I say?

Yet screening the film now it is easy to detect why there was so much critical disdain for *Watcher in the Woods*. Lynn-Holly Johnson makes for a whiny, plodding heroine, and all the dialogue is atrocious. The film wastes the talents of David McCallum and Carroll Baker—both present (briefly) in utterly thankless roles—and nothing of genuine interest happens for the first forty-five minutes. That much-altered ending, the so-called “dimensional exchange,” is dramatized poorly and doesn't make narrative sense in context of the rest of the film.

Still, *The Watcher in the Woods* is beautifully filmed and constructed with acceptable flourishes, and it would have been nice for critics to

make some notice of those facts too. The movie is goofy, it's true, yet punctuated by legitimate jumps. It isn't a total waste of time.

Thematically, *The Watcher in the Woods* is a modern Gothic, featuring a country house (remote location) and, a crumbling church (representing decay), and there's even a bit of madness on display via the tortured Bette Davis character. Designed as a response to Enlightenment, Gothic literature is often obsessed with death and destruction, as well as its harbingers (like a solar eclipse), and one can even see the disappearance and return of Karen in *Watcher in the Woods* to the other dimension as a kind of Orphean Underworld story. So, on a basic level, the film does attempt to be "literary."

Filmically, the film features P.O.V. stalking shots aplenty (a favorite technique of the 1980s) and these views are very fluid, and very fast. They're a bit more disturbing than the average subjective-camera stalk shot because of the extreme velocity and unusual "cornering" of the camera throughout the chase sequences. These shots predict the dynamic camera moves Sam Raimi perfected in *The Evil Dead* (1983). Also, there are some moody shots of a misty forest ... the perfect arboreal setting for a horror mystery like the one the film charts. Other impressive moments include a special effects sequence involving a blindfolded Karen in a hall of mirrors.

Throw in a little backwards writing (NERAK instead of KAREN), a car that seems to take off by itself across a bridge (before plummeting into a ravine), some flashy blue laser beams, an impending solar eclipse, and you have the ingredients for a nearly irresistible film to an eleven-year-old.

And ultimately, that's my caveat about *The Watcher in the Woods*. Like much of Disney's fare, the film is eminently suitable for the age-group now known as "tweens," those kids between nine and thirteen. In fact, I can imagine *The Watcher in the Woods* being an inspiration to a lot of youngsters, either to check out H.P. Lovecraft (who wrote similar stories about weird conjunctions and alternate realities), or fantasy novels; or even to further explore the history of horror cinema. So maybe the film actually serves its purpose well enough...

Without Warning

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jack Palance (Joe Taylor); Martin Landau (Fred “Sarge” Dobbs); Torah Nutter (Sandy); Christopher S. Nelson (Greg); Cameron Mitchell (Hunter); Neville Brand (Leo); Sue Ane Langdon (Aggy); Ralph Meeker (Dave); Larry Storch (Scoutmaster); Lyn Theel (Beth); David Caruso (Tom); Kevin Hall (Alien); Darby Hinton (Randy); Mark Ness (Bill).

CREW: Heritage Entertainment Presents a Greydon Clark production. *Executive Producers:* Skip Steloff, Paul Kimatian. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Co-Producers:* Daniel Grodnik, Lyn Freeman. *Film Editor:* Curtis Burch. *Production Manager:* Jefferson Richard. *Music:* Dan Wyman. *Special Effects:* Phillip Joseph Quinlivan III. *Special Makeup:* Greg Cannom. *Production Designer:* Jack De Wolf. *Associate Producers:* Curtis Burch, Milton Spencer. *Stunts:* Bruce Barbour, Cindy Wills. *Written by:* Lyn Freeman, Daniel Grodnik, Ben Nett, Steve Mathis. *Produced and Directed by:* Greydon Clark. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “No Chance. No Help. No Escape.”—A foreboding warning scrawled on the bathroom wall at a gas station in Greydon Clark’s precursor to *Predator* (1987), *Without Warning*.

SYNOPSIS: A hunter (Mitchell) takes his reluctant, grown son out into the woods for a day of hunting, only to be hunted himself by an alien predator armed with tiny, vicious bat-like creatures.

Meanwhile, nearby, four teens—Sandy (Nutter), Greg (Nelson), Tom (Caruso) and Beth (Theel)—head out in their van for a weekend at the lake, over the objections of a local hunter, Taylor (Palance), who warns that hunting accidents have been more numerous lately. Sandy and Greg later find Tom and Beth dead, their corpses hanging like trophies in a nearby shack. They flee to a country bar to seek help, but run afoul of a grizzled, paranoid Vietnam veteran, “Sarge” (Landau), who believes that aliens have begun an invasion. In fact, he’s half-right. The alien predator (Hall) is actually a hunter, using his biotechnology to help him stalk prey, take trophies, and display his quarry.

In the end, it’s up to Sandy and Taylor to hunt the hunter, a dangerous proposition since the shadowy alien appears unkillable.

COMMENTARY: A precursor to the much more popular and polished John McTiernan film, *Predator* (1987), Greydon Clark’s *Without Warning* posits an alien hunter stalking human prey in America’s back country. But where *Predator* is a crowd-pleasing actioner featuring

elaborate special effects and state-of-the-art makeup, *Without Warning* is somewhat more low-key; and *definitely* low budget. It focuses on horror rather than action, and actually—in some twisted fashion—attempts to serve as an allegory about hunting as “sport.”

Without Warning opens as an arrogant hunter, played by Cameron Mitchell, takes his (reluctant) grown son out in the woods. Mitchell believes that hunting will make his son “a man” and—while clutching his firearm—declares that “There’s not a feeling to beat this [hunting] in the whole world.” Then, in a moment of irony worthy of *Twilight Zone*, the hunter gets taken down by a far superior sportsman, one of extraterrestrial persuasion.



An alien hunter finds good sport on Earth in *Without Warning* (1980). That's an organic killer Frisbee leech in his right hand.

The underlying disdain for hunting continues throughout the film. In

Taylor's gas station, run by Palance, the camera pauses to feature isolated shots of animals mounted on the walls. These are trophies like deer, bear and bobcat. Later in the film, in nearly identical staging, the leads run across a small shack in the woods taken over by the alien. Hanging inside are his trophies: all human beings. The corpses hang, apparently half-eaten, but also "displayed" as trophies.

So hunting, *Without Warning* reveals, isn't such a great sport if you're the quarry.

In keeping with the anti-hunting underpinnings of the film, the only survivor of the alien's hunting spree is Sandy, a final girl who doesn't actually like the sport. Even though Palance's character states that hunting is a "good sport as long as you follow the rules," Sandy seems very unwilling to play the game. She ultimately destroys the alien, but not as the result of any hunting lessons Taylor provides her. Man's firearms prove practically useless, and the only way that the enemy is defeated is for both hunters (alien and Palance) to be destroyed together.

Sandy survives because she eschews the macho bullshit sometimes associated with hunting. "Don't worry, I'm going to get you out of this," her boyfriend (Nelson) assures her. Very shortly after, he's dead. "The only choice is where we're going to fight," Palance establishes, but then that choice is quickly taken away from him.

Sandy survives this night of terror, one senses, because she doesn't delude herself with macho reassurances. She understands the nature of the threat and just wants to escape.

Without Warning is an interesting little horror picture not only because of thematic consistency, but because it adopts without question the slasher paradigm. The aforementioned Sandy is the final girl, a character who is the first among her friends to detect danger. She's more perceptive than her buddies and her boyfriend, and has an insight about the danger. But beyond the final girl, *Without Warning* also provides such familiar elements of the slasher paradigm as the P.O.V. stalk shot, the moment when a car won't start, and the ever-popular "cat jump" (when a feline appears from out of the frame with a yelp and scares one of the characters).

Without Warning's greatest failing is probably its cast. And by that, I don't mean Christopher Nelson or Tarah Nutter, but rather the "big names." The film attempts to accommodate Cameron Mitchell, Neville Brand, Ralph Meeker and Larry Storch, and is not particularly

successful in giving these actors things to do. Cameron Mitchell dies in the prologue, so his role has purpose. But Larry Storch is a Boy Scout leader who wanders around the lake and is killed. Essentially, his character's purpose in the script duplicates Mitchell, and doesn't add anything except one more check on the body count scoreboard.

Similarly, Neville Brand—so memorable in Tobe Hooper's *Eaten Alive* (1976)—is wasted in a small role set at a country bar. The scene itself is rather interesting, a variation on the idea informing “Will the Real Martian Please Stand Up,” an episode of Serling's *Twilight Zone*, but neither Brand nor Ralph Meeker contribute much to the overall tale.

Then there's Martin Landau and his crazed “Vietnam vet,” Fred Dobbs. This character is named after Humphrey Bogart's Fred Dobbs in the 1948 film, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, but it's an homage that doesn't appear to make much sense, or be particularly informative. “Sarge” is really just a spoiler, existing solely to serve as a stumbling block in the last third of the film, constantly getting in the way of the strategy to defeat the alien hunter. Landau plays the role with wild-eyed exuberance and an out-of-control mane of hair. He skulks madly about bathrooms and bars and squad cars muttering to himself, and showing up at the least opportune times.

Some of Landau's lines are quite funny, particularly his realization “We ain't alone,” a country dialect rephrase of the *Close Encounters* (1977) ad-line, “We are not alone.” But his character is ultimately a red herring. All his talk of alien invasions is wrong ... the alien is just there to hunt.

Some reviewers have complained about the special effects, but given that they're 1980 vintage, the creatures in *Without Warning* remain pretty frightening. The screeching bat Frisbees the hunter uses are like little malevolent, fanged starfish, and the close-ups wherein they “attach” bloodily to their prey are gruesome. The alien itself (looking a little too humanoid) remains half-cloaked in shadows much of the time. He hardly moves, but rather stands in the distance, which makes him seem stronger and more menacing. Had the film depicted the alien hunter chasing the characters or coming to them, he would have seemed weaker. Instead, the way the climax is staged, the humans come to him and that makes him seem like a powerhouse. An immovable force of nature.

Finally, in a footnote of historical irony, the actor who portrays the alien hunter in *Without Warning*, one Kevin Hall, is actually Kevin Peter Hall ... who played the Predator in John McTiernan's film.

1981

January 20: Ronald Reagan takes the oath of office as president of the United States. Almost simultaneously in Iran, the American hostages are released.

March 30: John Hinckley Jr. attempts to assassinate Reagan at the Hilton in Washington. The President is rushed to emergency surgery and a bullet removed from a lung. Al Haig, secretary of state, declares he is “in charge” during the emergency. After the assassination attempt, Reagan’s popularity skyrockets (10 points), according to national polls.

July 7: Reagan nominates Sandra Day O’Connor as a justice on the Supreme Court. A conservative, O’Connor’s ascension is opposed by Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell because of her opinion on abortion. She is quickly confirmed by the United States Senate (99–0), making her the first woman to serve on the High Court.

July 29: Diana and Prince Charles wed at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London before an international TV audience of one billion.

August 1: On cable TV, a music network, MTV, premieres. MTV popularizes the music video (or “clips”), short films, often avant-garde, of bands performing their songs. A generation of American children grows up with MTV, its v.j.s (video jockeys), and video clips. Social critics worry that the popularization of the short form will impact audience attention span and mainstream movies soon emulate MTV’s fast-style of editing.

August 8: The Reagan administration fires striking Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO). Five thousand workers are let go, and the Union crushed. Big business sees Reagan’s move as a signal that he favors corporations over the American worker.

September 11: With a nation in recession and sky-rocketing unemployment, Nancy Reagan defends her choice to spend \$200,000 on a new china set for the White House.

September 12: NBC premieres the Saturday morning cartoon, The Smurfs, about a village of blue gnomes who live happy lives, save for the interference of a wizard named Gargamel and his evil cat, Azrael. The series takes off, garnering a 55 percent share in the Nielsens, and running until 1990. Smurf knock-offs, including The Snorks, also air.

September 14: Entertainment Tonight, a half-hour television series devoted to Hollywood movies, TV, and promotion, premieres. It's still airing in 2006.

October 6: Egyptian president and peacemaker Anwar Sadat is assassinated.

An American Werewolf in London



Critical Reception

“...a nearly perfect specimen of the wise-guy movie ... The wise-guy essence of the film is its blend of gory horror and cute cool, sort of like The Fonz Meets Frankenstein.... The movie mocks the creaking romantic mysticism of the old horror flicks while being infinitely more horrific than they ever were.”—Jack Kroll, “Cool Ghoul,” *Newsweek*, September 7, 1981, page 82.

“Delirious amalgam of gaffaws’n’gore ... special effects wizard Rick Baker’s man-into-wolf transformation is extraordinary, and never has the music of Credence Clearwater Revival been put to better use.”—Ed., John Pym, *Time Out Film Guide, Seventh Edition*, Penguin Books, 1999, page 26.

“A masterpiece from John Landis was scary without the excessive gore of your standard slasher flick, was very well-written, and genuinely funny.”—Glenn Gaslin and Rick Porter, *The Complete Cross-Referenced Guide to the Baby Buster Generation’s Collective Unconscious*, Boulevard Books, 1998, page 5.

“This film rides the fine line between comedy and horror (some would argue that horror is a form of comedy) a little uncomfortably. During the film’s last twenty minutes or so, Landis needs to tone down the comedy, and play up the drama, and something about that process hurts the film. Maybe it’s the nature of comedies—we don’t expect comedies with downer endings.

“On the plus side, there are many amazing things about this film. Griffin Dunne is fantastic as Jack, the doomed friend of our hero David Kessler. The initial attack on Dunne is achieved through some impressive editing and sound effects. Supporting appearances by Brian Glover and other British favorites are fairly priceless. The always fetching Jenny Agutter helps keep the dramatic spine of the film

intact, and James Naughton looked like he had a promising career beyond the Dr. Pepper commercials, but reality would destine a different fate.

“Rick Baker’s makeup effects represented the state of the art before the computer made rubber increasingly less relevant. The sight of a close-up on skin showing rapidly growing hair is probably the single-most effective transformation glimpse in any werewolf movie. Even if the rest of the film were worthless, the big transformation scene in this film is amazing. Elmer Bernstein added some good creepy music in-between the eventually tiresome moon-related songs. The jarring dream sequences are both intriguing (Naughton hunts a deer) and smacking of unnecessary (Nazi mutants attacking in suburbia). The comic elements in this film are the forte of John Landis (‘A naked American man stole my balloons!’) and outside of *Animal House*, this might be his best film. As horror, it has some chilling moments, the best being the hunt through the Underground, with outstanding cinematography, particularly a high shot of a looming lycanthrope approaching the bottom of an escalator. For what it is, this is a fine film.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

“This was one of the few horror movies, along with *Lost Boys*, to work in humor without stunting the frights. I don’t really care for modern movies like *Shaun of the Dead* or *Scary Movie* that play horror for laughs. I still want to be scared. This movie also featured some great special effects. Hollywood had come a long way since Michael Landon grew slow-dissolve fur as a teenaged werewolf.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Naughton (David Kessler); Jenny Agutter (Nurse Alex Price); Griffin Dunne (Jack Goodman); John Woodvine (Dr. Hirsch); Brian Glover (Chess Player); Lila Kaye (Barmaid); David Schofield (Dart Player); Paul Kember (Sgt. McManus); Frank Oz (Mr. Collins); Don McKillop (Inspector Villiers); Joe Belcher (Truck Driver); Paddy Ryan (First Werewolf); Anne-Marie Davies (Nurse Gallagher); Colin Fernandes (Benjamin); Albert Moses (Hospital Porter); Michele Brisigotti (Rachel Kessler).

CREW: PolyGram Pictures Presents a Lycanthrope Film Limited Production. *Film Editor:* Malcolm Campbell. *Original Music by:* Elmer Bernstein. *Special Makeup Effects Designed and Created by:* Rick Baker. *Art Director:* Leslie Dilley. *Director of Photography:* Robert Paynter.

Executive Producer: George Folsey Jr. *Written and Directed by:* John Landis. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

P.O.V.

“I don’t think *Werewolf* is ‘played for laughs.’ The idea behind the film, and in fact, the reason it is funny, is not because it is funny, is not because it is a comedy but because it is treating an absurd subject totally straight ... The film is conservative, very traditional: Monster At Large.”⁶—Director John Landis.

SYNOPSIS: Two American backpackers, David (Naughton) and Jack (Dunne) hike across the English countryside by full moon and are warned by the mysterious locals at the Slaughtered Lamb Pub to stay on the road and off the moors. They ignore the warning and are attacked by a vicious wolf, which murders Jack and wounds David.

David awakens three weeks later in a hospital in London and is befriended by a lovely nurse, Alex Price (Agutter) and a serious minded physician, Dr. Hirsch (Woodvine) who tells them that it was an animal that attacked him, not an escaped lunatic, as the locals in East Proctor claim. After he is released from the hospital, David shacks up with Alex, but his bliss is interrupted by ghoulish visitations from a decaying Jack, who warns him that he will soon become a werewolf and commit murder and worse, that Jack himself as the victim of a werewolf, is doomed to wander in limbo until the bloodline is destroyed. Jack encourages David to kill himself to end the bloodline, but David doesn’t believe he could possibly be a werewolf, at least not until the first night of the next full moon when his body begins to transform...

COMMENTARY: During his long and controversial career in Hollywood, John Landis has never directed a finer, more complex film than *An American Werewolf in London*. By turns, it is an amusing, tragic and downright entertaining modernization of the classic Wolf Man mythos.

One can detect in this unique horror movie the seeds of the post-modernism that would eventually dominate the genre in the 1990s with the *Scream* trilogy, particularly in *American Werewolf's* coupling of wiseacre humor, directorial homage, and intense violence and gore. Yet it isn’t necessarily for this reason that the Landis film remains a neo-classic, and the best of the 1980s werewolf pack.

Instead, *American Werewolf in London* explicitly concerns body image and the process of transformation, the notion that the body can buoy

and bolster a person and then—unfortunately—undercut a person too. Interestingly, the film equates transformation not with disease (as does John Carpenter's *The Thing*) or drug use (like several 1980s flicks, from *Near Dark* to *Brain Damage*), but rather to the stages of romantic love. Consider that so much of the werewolf mythos involves the stages of the moon ... and yet the moon is also the great matchmaker in the night sky. It has long been believed to control love as well as lycanthropes.

An American Werewolf in London begins strongly with an exploration of the *Innocents Abroad* template seen in other horror movies of the era, including *Beyond Evil* (1980) and *The House Where Evil Dwells* (1982). To wit, two young American males are depicted backpacking across Europe. The film displays scenes of the beautiful landscape around these tourists: mountains, winding roads and other grand vistas, all to the tune of *Blue Moon*, which—of course—is an in-joke regarding the cycle of the werewolf.

Surrounded by such beauty, what do these two characters discuss? *Sex*, of course. This is important because the discussion reveals that Jack and David are naive about their surroundings, strangers (or fools) in a strange land. They walk in the wild at night and evidence no real sense of danger, or even really, of their location. In addition to being an example of youthful arrogance and self-involvement, this scene also establishes well the notion that these two American youngsters are separated totally from nature, which hides great danger.

After the wolf attack which kills Jack and leaves David in the hospital, the film cuts to the first in a series of strange nocturnal phantasms; the first involves David running through the woods like an animal. Whereas before the landscape was meaningless to the self-involved David, not even noticed, the wolf blood in his veins has now re-connected David to the very world he once ignored. He is also about to meet the love of his life, and so there's a sense here of romance's first adrenaline rush.

In the second vision, as David runs naked through the woods again, he hears the call of the wild and begins to hunt wild animals, devouring them with bloody delight. In this portion of the film, David and his new girl, Alex, make love and that's a kind of devouring or taking too, so the metaphor holds.



In a year of many cinematic werewolves, Rick Baker's makeup for *An American Werewolf in London* (1981)—seen in close-up—was a highlight.

The sense of expectation builds as the first full moon approaches, and David suddenly lives in a state of anxiety and expectation. He knows he is changing into something new, and there is fear and terror comingled in this transformation. “Bad Moon Rising” plays on the soundtrack and David is revealed during this montage to be bored, restless, at loose ends. He has not yet become what he is destined to

be, and this might be seen as the point in his romantic relationship where difficulties arise.

When the final transformation occurs, it is painful and horrible. In his new form (as a werewolf) David must eventually be “put down” and the one to do it is Alex. This is critical, because the romantic soundtrack and the stages of David’s transformation always seem to link in either direct or ironic fashion to the relationship with this lovely woman. Like many a failed romantic relationship, *An American Werewolf in London* ends with one party standing, feeling devastated.

An American Werewolf in London evidences a nice sense of real life. We all live it lightly when things are fun and going well, but then things can change suddenly, on a dime. Life seems equal parts tragedy and farce. There’s much comical business in the film, much of it revolving around David’s uncomfortable public nudity, and the dream sequences alternate between exhilarating, wolfish P.O.V. vision to the truly nightmarish. On the latter front there’s a strange, off-kilter scene in which Nazi werewolves break into David’s family home, burn his house and slit his throat.

Framed as this tragic love story, *An American Werewolf in London* also includes the very latest in early 1980s special effects. The transformation scene by Rick Baker is absolutely stunning not just because it looks real, but because the viewer can almost feel the physicality of the strange change. Landis insisted on showing the entire transformation on screen and this act of bravado succeeds. Before our very eyes, the transformation seems absolutely real, and this is a feat that CG has yet to accomplish.

An American Werewolf in London is really like a great old-fashioned werewolf movie, one with all the modern trappings: gore, violence and even nudity. This respect for the classics wasn’t so easily detectable in 1981 when the movie came out and people complained that it was too violent, or the humor and rock soundtrack seemed too quirky. But in the 21st century, Landis’s film plays more like it was intended: as an homage to a noble genre; and as a literal reading of the werewolf myth, where every aspect of the tale is treated absolutely and totally realistically ... even if that means a laugh or two. The film is also touching in a subtle way, especially in the scene wherein David—anticipating the worst—contacts his family in the States and has a brief conversation with his ten-year-old sister, Rachel. The scene isn’t theatrical or played up, it just reinforces the idea that fate is quirky and whimsical. David has taken the opportunity to make his last call to his family, and his parents aren’t even at home...

LEGACY: In 1997, an unofficial sequel with CGI werewolves, entitled *An American Werewolf in Paris*, was released. It didn't fare well with critics or at the box office.

Anthropophagus
(a.k.a. *The Grim Reaper*)

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tisa Farrow (Julie); Saverio Vallone (Andy); Vanessa Steiger (Maggie); Margaret Donnelly (Rita); Mark Bodin (Daniel); Bob Larsen (Arnold); Rubina Ray (Irina); Simone Baker (Victim); George Eastman (Nikos); Mark Logan (Victim); Zora Kerova (Carol).

CREW: *Presented by:* Film Ventures International. *Film Editor:* Ornella Micheli. *Director of Photography:* Enrico Birbicchi. *Music:* Marcello Giombini. *Production Manager:* Oscar Santaniello. *Produced by:* Joe D'Amato, George Eastman, Edward L. Montoro. *Written by:* Louis Montefiori, Aristie Massacessi. *Directed by:* Joe D'Amato. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The lovely Julie (Farrow) joins five other tourists, including the very pregnant Maggie (Steiger), and Carol (Kerova), a believer in Tarot card predictions, on their vacation to a small Mediterranean island where the only means of communication with the outside world by telegraph. Julie is headed there to take care of Rita (Donnelly), an English couple's blind daughter, but raises Carol's ire when Danny (Bodin) expresses romantic interest in her.

Once on the island, the vacationers find it almost completely abandoned, the telegraph machine destroyed, and a warning scrawled on a window: "GO AWAY." As a storm rolls in, and their boat mysteriously heads out to sea without them, the vacationers are forced to contend with a monstrous, insane man stalking them. They find Rita, who claims she can sense when the lunatic is near, because he smells of blood.

After a night in which the madman strikes, killing Danny, the survivors head across the island and find the Weldman mansion. Until a recent tragedy, the Weldmans had been masters of the island for a century, but something horrible occurred, an accident at sea which left the Weldman patriarch unhinged ... and murderous. This grim reaper continues to stalk the vacationers. Worse, he appears to be

eating them...

COMMENTARY: *Anthropophagus* is a scary little Italian flick that covers some of the same terrain as *Humongous* (1982), another eighties horror set amongst a bunch of castaways trapped on an island with a madman. Yet *Anthropophagus* is actually a stronger film than its American counterpart, at least by a degree or two.

The movie, directed by the prolific ex-porno director, Joe D'Amato (a man of many pseudonyms), combines an effective musical score (it's the score from the 1977 "when animals attack" movie, *Kingdom of the Spiders*) and doom-laden pronouncements (like "I can smell him. He smells of blood. Blood...") with some very effective stalking and chase sequences. In all it's an effectively packaged effort, and one highly reminiscent of 1970s savage cinema.

D'Amato's film features a good location (an isolated village on a Mediterranean island) and, more importantly, doesn't wade too deeply into the pool of the slasher film clichés. The result is a film that feels less rote than many during this span. Even though the killer strikes only periodically, the film—unlike some movies—does not generate boredom, but rather a mood of suspense. It's rather like *Halloween* (though not that good) in this respect. The audience is aware the killer is watching (thanks to several heavy-breathing P.O.V. sequences), but many times he doesn't act, and that makes the film all the creepier. We wonder what he's waiting for.

Anthropophagus also gains traction from the director's use of the dark. Much of the film is set at night (including a scene in which Farrow is unexpectedly locked inside a cemetery), with the only significant light coming from occasional flashes of lightning in an approaching storm. This facet of the movie has a wonderful payoff during the scene of the killer's first appearance. Rita—the blind girl—is up in her bedroom, terrified, and Danny closes her in to go look for the killer. As he shuts the door, there is darkness in the frame, and then lightning flashes, and the killer's face is illuminated as he stands in the corner of the room, behind the door. It's a big shock. *Anthropophagus* features quite a few startling moments like that, only occasionally relying on clichéd "jolts" like the cat jump.

A good final chase can also make or break a horror film, and fortunately *Anthropophagus* doesn't disappoint in this category either. Toting Rita around, Julie runs up the stairs of the Weldman mansion, with the killer in pursuit. She finds refuge in the attic, but there's a surprise regarding the killer's location that on retrospect seems absurd

but on first viewing is a shock. The film ends with a great predicament: Tisa Farrow falls into a deep well outside the mansion, but hangs on to a rope around her wrist. Below her, stirring in the water, is the killer. He begins to climb up, right below her, as she tries to get enough momentum to reach a ladder on the wall and hightail it out of there. And then, the killer gets one end of the rope and starts to pull...

All the horror in D'Amato's film results from a transgression in the past; a reckoning of a man that a terrible act has forced him to drop the pretense of being civilized. The film reveals that terrible act in flashback, and it doesn't disappoint. In fact, *Anthropophagus* succeeds, to some extent, because it doesn't stop to linger on absurdities or supernatural occurrences (a frequent stumbling block in the Italian films of the 1980s) and because it never sheds its grim, macabre skin for humor or stupid characters. Frankly, it's much more coherent than most of Lucio Fulci's work in the decade, and not once is the streamlined narrative anything less than clear. Not to sound insulting, but the film almost feels American, except for the bad dubbing and occasionally funny translations.

The version of *Anthropophagus* that was available for screening did not feature the film's notorious fetus-ripping sequence involving Maggie, nor the entrails-eating sequence, but rather was the expurgated R version of this Italian release. That's all right, perhaps, since *Anthropophagus* is quite terrifying even in this condition.

Blood Tide

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Earl Jones (Frye); Jose Ferrer (Mayor); Lila Kedrova (Sister Anna); Mary Louise Weller (Shelly); Martin Kove (Neil); Lydia Cornell (Barbara); Deborah Shelton (Madelaine).

CREW: *Presented by:* Donald Langdon for Raftage. *Director of Photography:* Ari Savrou. *Supervising Editor:* Robert Leighton. *Associate Producer:* Kuigi Cincolani. *Art Director:* Aurelio Crugnola. *Costume Designer:* Moss Mabry. *Music:* Jerry Moseley. *Executive Producer:* John D. Schofield. *Screenplay:* Richard Jeffries, Nico Mastorakis. *Co-Producer and Creative Consultant:* Brian Trenchard Smith. *Producers:* Nico Mastorakis, Donald Langdon. *Directed by:* Richard Jeffries. **MPAA**

Rating: R. **Running time:** 82 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Please do not interfere with our local customs. At best it is ill-mannered. At worst, it is sacrilege.”—A warning in Richard Jeffries’ *Blood Tide*.

SYNOPSIS: Newlyweds Neil (Kove) and Sherry (Weller) visit the Greek islands in search of his sister Madelaine (Shelton), a painter and virgin who has been missing for four months. They find her with an adventurer named Frye (Jones) and his girlfriend, Barbara (Cornell); she’s working on restoring a strange old local painting that depicts the myth of a sea monster ... and a virgin’s sacrifice.

Meanwhile, Frye finds an underwater cavern and discovers an ancient temple there. He detonates an explosive and opens the temple, releasing an ancient, monstrous sea god. Soon the monster kills Barbara and stalks the nearby lands and sea. The town mayor (Ferrer) believes it is an old evil that can only be placated with a virginal sacrifice, and Madelaine believes this role to be her destiny.

COMMENTARY: While viewing *Blood Tide*, the viewer might experience the strong impression that this so-called “horror” movie was actually a tax write-off for its producers; an excuse to visit the Mediterranean, go sailing and engage in some heavy carousing.

Much of the film bears out such an explanation. Several scenes involve gorgeous women sun-bathing on the beach in the skimpiest of bathing suits, or characters getting drunk while chatting around a supper table. Then there’s some stuff on a yacht. And the material that actually involves the ostensible plot—like the design and appearance of the monster—is pretty slipshod.

Not that there aren’t worse ways to spend eighty-two minutes. These sun-soaked, Greek lands are a gorgeous locale to produce a film, and every now and then, a powerful or pretty image bubbles to the surface. In one exceedingly macabre (and shocking) moment, a dead nun stares blindly into the glare of a probing flashlight, her neck snapped. That’s scary.

There’s enough talk of local legends involving sea monsters and virgins to keep one tuned in. There’s even some fine underwater photography to maintain a mild interest in the proceedings.

Probably the best element of the film is the scantily clad female cast. So memorable (and sexy) in *Body Double* (1984), actress Deborah Shelton goes for broke in *Blood Tide*. Near the film’s climax, she goes

out to sea to sacrifice herself—body and soul—to the rubbery ancient sea dweller, and proceeds to work herself into a frothing sexual frenzy. Shelton writhes about a small raft erotically, as though having intercourse with an invisible partner, and ... well, the actress is very convincing.

And then there's the unforgettable scene wherein buxom blond Lydia Cornell exercises on the beach. She's tan, blond, greased up (with suntan lotion) and very limber doing those stretches and bends. Too bad the next scene involves the actress—a sweet presence, actually—getting mauled in the water. Something terrible (and unseen) pulls her below the waves, and then there's blood everywhere.

But what the heck's James Earl Jones doing in this stinker? The experienced, dignified actor acts in *Blood Tide* as though he's in an altogether different movie than the rest of the cast. His delivery is grandiose, booming, and laced with theatricality. Perhaps Jones was just on board the production to get in his scuba diving training before his next vacation in Hawaii?

After a fashion, the story of *Blood Tide* is again that familiar chestnut, the *Innocents Abroad* convention depicted in 1980's *Beyond Evil* and 1982's *The House Where Evil Dwells*. Again, unwelcome interlopers (eternally “ignorant” Americans) stumble into a culture they don't understand (here on the Greek islands) and find one of their own kind (always a woman) imperiled. There's the stupid American male—an impotent authority—who doesn't understand what's happening. This archetype is played to perfection in *Blood Tide* by Martin Kove of *Last House on the Left* (1972) fame. James Earl Jones serves as the American “taker,” in search of local treasure and using unscrupulous means (like explosives) to exploit it. Shelton is the bewitched woman possessed, drawn into the ethnic sacrificial ritual, and Jose Ferrer plays the stony-faced mayor who warns the Americans that they are treading in local customs they don't understand.

But remember, all of this material is purely secondary to the beach scenes...

Dead and Buried

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[A]fter some irritating meanderings, the film picks up momentum

and, via a splendidly staged confrontation in a Mabuse-style lab, progresses to a ‘surprise’ climax, which, even if anticipated, must still rank a close second to the false ending of *Carrie*. Gruesome almost to a fault...”—John Pym, editor, *Time Out Film Guide*, Seventh Edition, Penguin Books, 1999, page 205.

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Farentino (Dan Gillis); Melody Anderson (Janet); Jack Albertson (Dobbs); Dennis Redfield (Ron); Nancy Locke Hauser (Linda); Lisa Blount (Girl on Beach); Robert Englund (Harry); Bill Quinn (Ernie); Michael Currie (Horman); Christopher Allport (George Le Mayne); Lisa Marie (Hitchhiker); Estelle Omens (Betty); Barry Corbin (Phil); Linda Turley (Waitress); Michael Pataki (Sam).

CREW: Richard R. St. Johns presents a Ronald Shusett Production. **Music:** Joe Renzetti. **Makeup Effects Design:** Stan Winston. **Film Editor:** Alan Balsam. **Art Directors:** Bill Sandell, Joe Aubel. **Director of Photography:** Steve Poster. **Executive Producer:** Richard R. St. Johns. **Story by:** Jeff Millar, Alex Stern. **Screenplay by:** Ronald Shusett, Dan O’ Bannon. **Produced by:** Ronald Shusett, Robert Fentress. **Executive in Charge of Production:** John W. Hyde. **Casting:** Linda Francis. **Stunt Coordinator:** Bill Couch. **Directed by:** Gary Sherman. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the quaint coastal town of Potter’s Bluff, an odd conspiracy is afoot amongst the seemingly charming and colorful townspeople. Terrible murders are occurring—and being photographed for some dark purpose. All of this is being done at the direction of some mysterious and unseen puppet master.

Sheriff Dan Gillis (Farentino) investigates the latest death—apparently a car accident—and determines that it was actually murder. Yet days later, he finds the victim alive and well and pumping gas in town under a different name, with no memory of his previous life. Gillis’s wife Janet (Anderson) begins to act strangely too, and the sheriff wonders if she could be in on the odd goings-on.

Finally, the trail of dead (and disappearing) bodies leads Gillis to his friend, the cantankerous old town mortician, Dr. Dobbs (Albertson). It seems that Dobbs is actually some kind of zombie-master, a man who has perfected a way to bring the dead back to life as his servants, and even made them look beautiful again. All the townspeople—including Janet—are his ghastly creations. But that isn’t Dobb’s last surprise for Sheriff Gillis...

COMMENTARY: Welcome to Potter's Bluff, a "new way of life" (as the sign just outside town promises). The sign couldn't be more wrong, however, as Potter's Bluff is a place where time stands still, where oldtime America thrives.

Welcome to *Dead and Buried*, an effective and scary movie that is very unlike most of its early 1980s brethren. This film exhumes the old-fashioned Hollywood notions of zombies and zombie masters (pre-George Romero and *Night of the Living Dead*), and follows a police investigator, played by James Farentino, on a hair-raising journey to discover his own destiny.

Although its tale of a small town enslaved by an aged mortician is not especially plausible (especially since he never shares his secret for resuscitating the dead), *Dead and Buried* creates an overarching atmosphere of looming dread by uncomfortably focusing on the rituals of death. As a people, we tend not to be comfortable with the preparations for the grave, including embalming, but *Dead and Buried* takes the viewer on a tour of these in a few disturbing scenes. In one sequence, for instance, mortician Dobbs reconstructs a dead person's face. *Dead and Buried* utilizes time-lapse photography to highlight the ghoulish moment, including the instant when a squishy new eyeball is provided for the corpse.

Aside from a 1980s-style lingering over gore (including a gross-out moment when a zombie, pretending to be a nurse, sticks a syringe into George's eye in close-up), the very real value of *Dead and Buried* might simply be that in production design, character touches and even stylistics, the film reflects the solution to the mystery.

Consider that the final moments of the film reveal that Dobbs, an old man, is the zombie puppet master of this small town, which seems trapped thirty or thirty-five years in the past. All of the zombies do his bidding, and accordingly, the private world he has fashioned resembles nothing so much as 1940s–50s Norman Rockwell Americana, the period, not coincidentally, when Dobbs was at his physical prime, a young man. He's an old-fashioned guy now—still living in the past—and the production design reveals this trait. Dobbs likes to listen to 1940s era record albums, and the props in his office include an old typewriter, a record player and a rotary phone. Each one indicates his obsession on the past and the world of decades gone by.

The same subtle touches are seen in the depiction of the wider town. For example, the diner, populated by locals, feels distinctly like a relic

of the 1950s. A kindly old man at the local drug store seems out of step with modern America. Even the house where tourists flee when pursued by the zombies, in perhaps the most atmospheric and frightening scene in the film, is also determinedly old-fashioned, with a 1950s-style refrigerator in its kitchen. The point of all this production design and character casting seems to be that Dobbs is “preserving” a simpler time that is personally meaningful to him.

Stylistically, *Dead and Buried* employs both the aforementioned time-lapse photography (an old film special effects technique, one distinctly out of fashion in the 1980s) and black-and-white film imagery in its mind-blowing climax to visually reflect the theme of an old man shaping his world to fit his whim. The 1980s is not to Dobbs’ liking. Dobbs with his predilection to recreate 1980s America in the more “quaint” image of the patriotic, conservative, Eisenhower (or Truman) era of the past, is clearly a Reagan figure: also an older man swept into power by his promise to renew “traditional” American values. Many feared that Reagan was too old to be president, and Dobbs even reflects that truth: He sleeps in a mortuary drawer and so almost literally has one foot in the grave.

In both cases, however, there seems to be an inherent warning. This is the “don’t worry, be happy/be afraid, be very afraid” duality of the times. On the surface, Potter’s Bluff and America both appear beautiful, strong, resilient. Life is good. Underneath, however, is the dark side. In *Dead and Buried*, that dark side is zombies and tyranny, whereas in Reagan’s eighties it was a dismantling of the social safety net, deficit spending, bloated federal government and on and on.

Dead and Buried also exhibits a paranoia typical of the age (and seen in films such as *The Thing* [1982]), that people in the “new” age of the 1980s don’t really know their neighbors, and therefore can’t trust them. That nice family may, in fact, harbor horrible secrets. Like the fact that they’re the undead servants of a zombie overlord...

Deadly Blessing



Critical Reception

“A minor miracle.”—Carrie Rickey, *The Village Voice*, August 20, 1981.

“Wes Craven has a flair for scaring his audience ... and [a] talent for making his characters comfortable and believable, even under the

weirdest circumstances.”—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*, August 15, 1981.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Maren Jensen (Martha Schmidt); Sharon Stone (Lana); Susan Buckner (Vicki Anderson); Jeff East (John Schmidt); Coleen Riley (Melissa); Douglas Barr (Jim Schmidt); Lisa Hartman (Faith Stohler); Lois Nettleton (Louisa Stohler); Ernest Borgnine (Isaiah Schmidt); Michael Berryman (William Gluntz); Kevin Cooney (Sheriff); Bobby Dark (Theater Manager); Kevin Farr (Fat Boy); Neil Fletcher (Grave Digger); Jonathan Gulla (Tom Schmidt); Lawrence Montaigne (Matthew Gluntz); Lucky Mosley (Sammy); Percy Rodriguez (Narrator).

CREW: PolyGram Pictures presents an Inter-Planetary Production, a Wes Craven film. *Casting:* Shari Rhodes, Liz Keigley. *Production Design:* Jack Marty. *Film Editor:* Richard Bracken. *Music:* James Horner. *Stunt Coordinator:* Ted Grossman. *Associate Producers:* Glenn M. Benest, Matthew Barr. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Jere Henshaw. *Director of Photography:* Robert Jessup. *Executive Producer:* William Gilmore. *Producers:* Max A. Keller, Micheline H. Keller, Patricia S. Herskovic. *Story:* Glenn M. Benest, Matthew Barr. *Screenplay:* Glenn M. Benest, Matthew Barr, Wes Craven. *Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young married couple, the Schmidts, live near the bountiful farmland of the conservative religious fundamentalist group known as the Hittites. On the Schmidt farm, named Our Blessing, Jim (Barr) is murdered one night, leaving a terrified wife, Martha (Jensen), behind. The local Hittites, including Jim's father, the preacher Isaiah (Borgnine), insist on calling Martha an “Incubus” and shunning her, so two of Martha's city friends come to stay with her to keep her company, Vicki (Buckner) and Lana (Stone).

While Isaiah attempts to pressure Martha into selling the farm, the women are confronted with terrifying incidents, including a vicious dog on a jogging path and a rattlesnake slipped into the bathtub. While Lana is bedeviled by nightmares about spiders, Vicki dies when her car is doused with gasoline and set aflame with her inside. Behind all the terror is a neighborly family, the Stohlers, and a secret of sexual confusion and identity that they guard. And then, there's the matter of the incubus...

COMMENTARY: Wes Craven's third feature film, *Deadly Blessing*, is a

scary, effective film that lacks the almost ruthless, savage nature of his work in the seventies, namely *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). Given the movies produced at the same time, it's perhaps not surprising that the film apes the style of *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Halloween* (1978). In particular, point of view stalk shots of intruders entering darkened homes and voyeuristically glaring at pulchritudinous women disrobing dominate the film. Fortunately, Craven is always an intellectual force behind the camera, and by setting his film in a religious fundamentalist world, the director finds plenty of time to offer valuable commentary about this milieu, one which has fascinated and alarmed him over time, as he reported in the 1990s:

The Christian Fundamentalist-political right is a very powerful force now in America, and they really target horror films ... under the guise of family values... [L]ook at the responses to abortion clinics and people who are willing to go out and murder people and feel completely all right about it, because they think they're acting on the part of God. That gets pretty scary.”⁷

In light of these remarks, *Deadly Blessing* concerns the negative impacts of repression, a common theme in Craven's movies. Isaiah, the Hittite leader (Ernest Borgnine), is the man whom Craven sees as the primary hypocrite. This is a supposedly righteous man who stands up and claims to be “the kindred of God” and yet mercilessly beats his children and the children of others in his flock. He passes judgment on those who do not share his sense of right and wrong, although Scripture specifically advises one should not judge, lest he be likewise judged.

He is also a bigot who exploits his authority and “personal relationship” with God to judge the value and morality of other human beings. As a result of his strict adherence to so-called religious principles, he alienates both of his sons and leads Louisa and Faith to hate men. It is Isaiah's repression of natural human feelings such as desire that cause the human psychoses which blossom around him.

Isaiah is directly responsible for Louisa's mad, pathological hatred of men (whom she considers useless authority figures who just want to impregnate women). He is likewise indirectly responsible for Faith's confused sexual identity. Since Louisa hates men so vehemently, she does not permit her son to express or demonstrate masculinity, and the result is a new generation twisted by the values of the previous one.

Isaiah's domination of the Hittites—essentially an extended family—and his control over local politics is also resented by every major character in the film, even the warm-hearted Martha. Isaiah attempts to run Martha and the Stohlers off their rightful property, another bit of hypocrisy and corruption since material wealth needn't be significant to a man of God. He also turns a blind eye to William's continued harassment of "non-believers" since it suits his overall purpose, their removal from a domain he wants to own.

In a sense, *Deadly Blessing*'s supernatural incubus really serves as Isaiah's id. It strikes out against those he cannot tolerate and removes the threats to his way of life. At the end of the film, the incubus kills Martha, consequently leaving her house and property to the Hittites. The incubus, operating through the people Isaiah deems messengers, Faith or Louisa, also kills two men who have purposefully flouted Isaiah's corrupt authority: sons Jim and John. If the incubus is Isaiah's alter ego, then the point of *Deadly Blessing* is that the men who claim to be kindred with God are actually guilty of spawning evil.

Deadly Blessing is a rich little film that deploys surprises, sympathetic characterizations and—forecasting *A Nightmare on Elm Street*—dreams, to tell its story of repression and the widespread ramifications. Despite many strengths, the film did not garner much attention during its release and is not remembered particularly fondly. The final supernatural twist, which appears to come out of left field, is also off-putting to viewers who have not detected the film's subtle clues and find the ending dramatically unmotivated. Small technical flaws also lead to dissatisfaction. The tense nature of the notorious snake in a tub (which slinks up between Maren Jensen's legs) is undercut when the performer's black bikini bottom is clearly visible for several seconds at a time beneath the water.

Still, *Deadly Blessing* passes the ultimate horror test: it's scary. The final fifteen minutes, wherein Louisa and Faith Stohler launch a sustained assault on Martha's farmhouse, certainly matches the intensity of Craven's earlier, more celebrated outings.

The Dorm That Dripped Blood

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Formula shocker is not badly done, but keeps dissipating (with its

predictable suspense-plot twists) the little good will it succeeds in building up with actors and dialogue. Much too much time is devoted to the perambulations (and occasional outright skulkings) of a very obvious red herring..."—Donald C. Willis, *Horror and Science Fiction Films III*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984, page 80.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Laurie Lapinski (Joanne); Stephen Sachs (Craig); David Snow (Brian); Pamela Holland (Patti); Dennis Ely (Bobbie Lee); Woody Roll (John Hemmit); Daphne Zuniga (Debbie); Robert Frederick (Tim); Jimmy Betz (Officer Lewis); Chris Morrill (Jack); Chandre (Alice); Billy Criswell (Rick).

CREW: A Wescom Production—Jeff Obrow Production. *Associate Producer:* Stacey Grachino. *Director of Photography:* Stephen Carpenter. *Makeup and Special Effects:* Matthew Mungle. *Assistant Director:* John Hopkins. *Production Manager:* Samson Asianian. *Production Consultant:* Robert L. Newman. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Screenplay by:* Stephen Carpenter, Jeffrey Obrow, Stacey Giachino. *Producer:* Jeffrey Obrow. *Directed by:* Jeffrey Obrow, Stephen Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Plucky Joanne (Lapinski) and four other students, Debbie (Zuniga), Craig (Sachs), Patti (Holland) and Brian (Snow), decide to remain on campus over the Christmas holiday to close down an old dorm, Morgan Meadows Hall. It's their job to catalog all the inventory, prepare cast-off items for sale, and generally maintain the premises.

This job is hampered by the presence of an unpopular and strange student, John Hemmit (Roll). Then, as night comes, *real* trouble starts. The dorm's power fluctuates unexpectedly, and someone destroys the group's dinner table. Debbie has disappeared and the school custodian is murdered with his own drill. Joanne and the others realize they are being stalked by a lunatic, and suspect that Hemmit is the culprit. Brian dies next, and then Patti is dropped into a deep fryer, leaving only Joanne and Craig alive to deal with the deadly psycho.

COMMENTARY: Within the relatively unambitious confines it sets for itself, *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* is a fairly suspenseful addition to the slasher canon. There's a low-budget energy in the score, the performances, and even the camerawork. Some moments even feel downright disturbing (such as a murder by baseball bat), and the movie courageously offers a few new twists to the familiar slasher

paradigm. It's a cutthroat film and, on occasion, a surprising one.

The organizing principle in *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* is one that's familiar, but it's been tweaked. Many slasher films occur on college or high school campuses (right up to 2005's *Cry Wolf*), but *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* offers a twist. Here it's a campus during the holidays (like *H2O* [1998]), where a few students and staff members (including a red herring custodian) have remained behind to conduct a master inventory. A dorm is being closed down and so this group of kids has work to do, not just weed to smoke, etc.

The college campus provides the locale for the horror, the red herring pool (the custodian and campus dork Hemmit), the victim base (the kids), and even the rationale for the killings. In this case, the real killer is Craig, the practical joker, and this is the first and only time in genre history, perhaps, that the practical joker has also actually been the perpetrator of the crimes. His motivation goes right back to the college venue. "What's wrong with me?" he raves. "I'm the smartass that nobody takes seriously..."

The Dorm that Dripped Blood also offers up one very efficient and rational final girl in Joanne, played by Laurie Lapinski. She may not be traditionally beautiful, like some cinematic final girls, but somehow Laurie seems more like a real person. Laurie is tough, resourceful, a problem solver, and if truth be told, a little bit of a pain in the ass. She leads the inventory job in an annoyingly peppy, let's-get-the-job-done fashion and is demanding as she adheres to responsibilities she takes very seriously. But her character seems naturalistic and true to life. We all know kids like her. She's a smart person, and she fights back when cornered. So there's that push-back.

Unfortunately, Laurie is undone because she can't see past her societal prejudice (and indeed none of the victims can) that what is beautiful or handsome must be good (Craig) and what is different or ugly must be bad, even dangerous (John). The killer plays on this Persian flaw ... successfully.

And that's another reason why *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* is inventive. Ultimately, the killer wins. Useless authority (in the form of the local police) arrives and shoots the wrong guy, leaving Joanne to burn up in the furnace (which she does), and Craig—the killer—to walk away scot free.

Only rarely in 1980s slasher films do the slashers "win" (although many escape [*My Bloody Valentine*] or are resurrected for sequels).

Again, one senses that his victory occurs here because Craig boasts the acceptable face of a good-looking, white, upper-class, athletic boy. Neither cops nor Joanne, nor anybody else can really imagine that Craig—so cocky, confident and jocular—would be a monster. In the eighties, surface image trumped everything.

Some writers have expressed the idea that *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* is depressing because all the heroes lose. In such a predictable subgenre however, invention ought to be championed rather than attacked. That the film plays with expectations and comes up with a zinger at the finale is probably a courageous thing ... even if it doesn't fit into the approved script of the horror film scholar, namely that these films are all "pro-woman" and that, by surviving a slasher spree, the final girl proves the films are not misogynist. I subscribe to that belief but there's more than one way to skin a cat. The makers of *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* need not toe any party line it doesn't wish to. For this writer, the joy in broaching each new slasher film is how it subverts, undercuts or reinforces the paradigm, and this is a film that plainly has fun with that equation. The ending is grim, but this movie is cutthroat, and what more could you want from a slasher pic? A girl's parents get murdered in blunt, brutal fashion (one strangled; one bludgeoned) and a nice old man gets a drill through his skull. And someone's going to quibble about a final girl thrown in the furnace? Where, literally, audience expectations go up in smoke?

It's also interesting to note that the killer in *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* does not adorn the expected specific uniform that usually differentiates him from the victim base. Here, he's an infiltrator, one of the gang, and that fits in with the thesis about not trusting our own eyes, about societal bias towards attractive well-to-dos. If Joanne had listened to John Hemmit, had trusted "the dork," the ugly duckling, she'd be alive today. That's another alteration in form that grants *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* some distinction.

Nor does the killer settle on a particular weapon, using a deep fryer, the bat, his bare hands and also a drill, when it suits him. The film's climax is also really strong, a good final chase that ends in what can only be described as a bloodbath. Yes the movie's cheap, and yes it often appears to have been shot in a university's basement (the trash heap that dripped blood). But it generates scares in its own energetic fashion, as in the creepy instance when Joanne is trapped in an elevator and someone gazes in at her with a flashlight. She's blinded by the light, and "blindness" is the handicap that all the characters suffer in this film. They can't see the forest for the tree, or the killer in their midst.

The Fan

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“By the standards of its kind, *The Fan* is well-made entertainment. The plot is efficient and properly ingenious, though I was surprised by the willingness of the New York City homicide squad to accept at face value the identity of a faceless corpse.”—Robert Hatch, *The Nation*, June 13, 1981, pages 739–40.

“*The Fan* is a hypnotic journey through the dark tunnel of hate from which you’ll emerge limp and leery and perhaps more concerned than ever about a society that spawns psychotics, terrorists and assassins ... [A] disturbingly authentic thriller....”—Guy Flatley, “What Price Fame,” *Cosmopolitan*, August 1981, page 14.

“*The Fan*, a suspense-thriller of rather unfortunate timeliness, has several terrific things going for it, and they’re all named Lauren Bacall ... *The Fan* is a far from perfect movie, but it’s an entertaining one. It’s also the next best thing to seeing its dynamic star live on stage...”—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*, May 22, 1981, page C8.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lauren Bacall (Sally Ross); Michael Biehn (The Fan, Douglas Breen); James Garner (Jake Berman); Maureen Stapleton (Belle Goldman); Hector Elizondo (Inspector Raphael Andrews); Anna Marie Horsford (Emily Stole); Kurt Johnson (David Branum); Feige Martinez (Elsa); Dwight Schultz (Director); Dana Delany (Sales Woman in Record Store); Reed Jones (Choreographer); Kaiulani Lee (Douglas’s Sister); Terence Marinan (Young Man in Bar); Lesley Rogers (Heidi); Parker McCormick (Hilda); Liz Smith (herself); Griffin Dunne (Production Assistant).

CREW: *Presented by:* Robert Stigwood. *Musical Score:* Pino Donaggio. *Conducted by:* Natale Massara. *“Hearts, Not Diamonds” and “A Remarkable Woman” Music by:* Marvin Hamlisch. *Lyrics by:* Tim Rice. *Casting:* Alixe Gordon. *Film Editor:* Alan Heim. *Director of Photography:* Dick Bush. *Production Designer:* Santo Loquasto. *Associate Producers:* Bill Oakes, John Nicolella. *Executive Producer:* Kevin McCormick. *Based on the novel by:* Bob Randall. *Screenplay by:* Priscilla Chapman, John Hartwell. *Produced by:* Robert Stigwood. *Directed by:* Edward Bianchi.

MPAA Rating: R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Aging movie star Sally Ross (Bacall) has just completed a run on Broadway in a dramatic play and is moving to rehearsals on the new stage musical “Never Say Never,” unaware that a young fan named Douglas Breen (Biehn) is obsessed with her and constantly sending love letters.

When his missives go too far and begin to become sexually explicit, Mrs. Ross’s secretary, Belle (Stapleton), cuts him off, an act which propels the mad Douglas to attack her in the New York City subway with a straight razor. Ross’s co-star Branum (Johnson) gets slashed next, this time in a swimming pool. As opening night draws nearer, so does this emboldened fan.

Fearing for her life, Ross bows out of previews for “Never Say Never” and heads to an isolated house on the beach, where she reconciles with her movie star husband, Jake Berman (Garner). Breen is not done, however, and stages his own violent death to bring Ross back to Manhattan for the debut of her show, and his final, desperate gambit to be loved by the object of his affection.

COMMENTARY: Released in May of 1981, *The Fan*, a film concerning a relentless celebrity stalker, felt incredibly timely. Just the previous December 8, the crazed Mark David Chapman had gunned down former Beatle John Lennon in cold blood.

In addition, mere weeks before *The Fan*’s release (on March 30, 1981), John Hinckley Jr.—a deranged fan who had obsessively stalked *Taxi Driver* (1976) star Jodie Foster—attempted to assassinate President Reagan to gain the actress’s love and adoration.

Given such examples, one can forgive viewers who mistook this film’s fiction for fact. Thus *The Fan* gave new meaning to the term “ripped from the headlines,” even though it was based on a Bob Randall novel first published in 1977.

Still, it’s funny how *The Fan* has aged. Were this movie remade today, the diehard fan would run a website, host a forum, pen a daily appreciation blog, podcast, and link to the celebrity’s work as an Amazon.com associate. The age of the typewriter and fan letter is truly over.

Of course, you can’t blame the movie that time has eclipsed it. And to its credit, *The Fan* starts out very strong (and very dynamically, at least in a visual sense) with the camera’s close-up perusal of the fan’s

tools. Against a black backdrop, the camera sees photographs, a playbill, papers, pencils, white-out, stamps, envelopes, typewriter keys and all the other items that help fan Douglas Breen maintain a connection to his favorite star, Sally Ross. He watches her old movies on *The Late Show* and dreams of worshiping her up close. “Here’s to us, Sally,” Breen toasts, while fantasizing that he’s sharing dinner with her when, in fact, he’s not even a blip on Sally’s radar.

In what is perhaps an homage to *Taxi Driver*, Biehn’s character even practices in front of a mirror, just like Travis Bickle. Biehn is often remembered for his role as the heroic Hicks in *Aliens* (1986), but the actor does a creepy good job of getting inside Breen’s head.

As for Sally, she’s a bit of a dictator herself. She barks orders at her assistant and refers to herself as a “spoiled bitch.” She decries the necessity of living in a bubble, isolated from humanity, but seems incapable of having a genuine relationship with anybody. She writes Breen off as harmless, and in fact is upset that her assistant may have offended a “fan.” She has no idea that she’s in danger.

The Fan takes a violent turn when the assistant, played by the kindly and matronly Maureen Stapleton, cuts off Breen’s letters and he responds with a sweaty, violent intensity. In a very tense sequence, replete with tracking shots, Breen pursues the assistant through the subway station by night and then cuts her face open with a straight razor. This is like seeing your own grandmother attacked, and hence quite discomforting.

Later, when Breen seeks to direct attention away from himself so he can attend Sally’s show, he goes to a gay bar and deliberately finds a lover roughly his height and build. Breen takes this man to the roof, and when the gay man goes down on bended knee to perform fellatio, the straight razor comes out again ... and it’s a highly disturbing, sexually charged moment ... especially since the film has depicted Breen as impotent.

The biggest horror in *The Fan* finds the legendary Bacall forced to participate in the performance of a musical stage extravaganza called “Never Say Never.” The show is a 1980s camp hoot, replete with swirling mist, blaring trumpets and lots and lots of sequins. Bacall sings (off-key) about needing hearts, not diamonds, while Breen, as always, covered with sweat, waits to grab her, and the camera prowls backstage.

The final confrontation between fan and celebrity is not all that it

could and probably should be. Breen approaches the object of his desire, who—let's face it—is too old for him, and implores her, “Please love me!” When she won’t reciprocate, he goes ballistic and gets hostile. He demands, “Do you think being who you are gives you the right to treat me like garbage?”

The fact is, Sally never treated him like garbage. To treat Breen like garbage, she would have had to give him a second thought, and as a big Hollywood star, she simply never did that. She never knew him, but he lives in such a delusional fantasy world that he’s exaggerated his importance in her life. It’s sad and very, very creepy. Finally, Sally stabs Breen with his own knife and the terror ends, but the point is made succinctly: There are people in this world (people like John Hinckley, Mark David Chapman and Douglas Breen) who can’t tell the difference between fact and fantasy.

Although *The Fan* is a hit or miss affair, Michael Biehn gives a sinister and highly nuanced performance as the titular character, and his work elevates this material. Bacall does fine, but looks worn and haggard throughout. She’s a great actress of the theatrical age, but Biehn delivers a stirring, naturalistic and thoroughly modern performance, so there’s also a strange and even helpful dissonance at play in the movie. Old Hollywood meets New Hollywood, and it’s a scary combination. The movie star and the psycho both dwell in fantasy worlds, after all. The former is pampered and has everything she needs and wants at her fingertips, and the other lives in a constant state of needing and desire, hoping that some of that (fake) glamour and elegance will light up his life. He doesn’t realize that the Sally Ross of the silver screen is just as much an “illusion” as his fantasy relationship with her.

LEGACY: Another movie called *The Fan* (1996) starred Robert De Niro (Bickle lives!) as another celebrity stalker and covered virtually the same territory as this movie. The object of his obsession was a professional ballplayer played by Wesley Snipes.

Fear No Evil

★ ★

Critical Reception

“It’s hard to describe a film as almost a masterpiece, but this one fits that description. Budget woes ding this film, along with the desire to

appeal to audiences of the age (there's some unnecessary high school angst content that feels like it belongs in another film). While the 1970s offered the Catholic horror film (*The Exorcist*) and the Protestant horror film (*The Omen*), *Fear No Evil* bridges the two, basically creating a Catholic version of *The Omen*. But you know what? It works. The actors are earnest, Stefan Arngrim leaves *Land of the Giants* behind and does a good job as the/an antichrist for this film. Director Frank LaLoggia's enthusiasm for this project, however, is what sells it. In many ways, he directs like a much more experienced director. He contributed themes for the score (John Carpenter's impact, perhaps?). And some exotic locations really make this film look more expensive than it is. It doesn't all hold together perfectly, but what's here is an entertaining little film made with lots of style. It has a conviction in its mythology that the *Omen* films lacked, even if the *Omen* films were more polished."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

"[T]he sort of thing that tempts a movie reviewer to swear off films forever."—Archer Winsten, *The New York Post*, February 6, 1981, page 37.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stefan Arngrim (Andrew); Elizabeth Hoffman (Margaret/Mikhail); Kathleen Rowe McAllen (Julie/Gabrielle); Frank Birney (Father Daly); Daniel Eden (Tony); Jack Holland (Rafeel/Father Damon); Barry Cooper (Mr. Williams); Alice Sachs (Mrs. Williams).

CREW: An Avco-Embassy Film. A LaLoggia Production of a Frank LaLoggia Film. *Art Director:* Carl Zollo. *Music Composed by:* Frank LaLoggia, David Spear. *Music Orchestrated and Conducted by:* David Spear. *Script Continuity:* Kathryn Gibney. *Post-Production Supervisor:* Daryn Okada. *Co-Producer:* Becky Morrison. *Associate Producers:* Carl R. Reynolds, Donald P. Borcher. *Film Editor:* Edna Ruth Paul. *Director of Photography:* Fred Goodich. *Executive Producer:* Charles M. LaLoggia. *Produced by:* Frank and Charles LaLoggia. *Written and Directed by:* Frank LaLoggia. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In upstate New York in 1963, Lucifer is born as William (Arngrim), the son of a postman (Cooper). Also on Earth to defeat this menace are two of God's archangels, Michael and Rafael, but in the bodies of humans Margaret (Hoffman) and a Catholic priest, Father Damon (Holland).

They await the birth of Gabriel to form their holy trinity, but Damon

dies before this promise can be fulfilled. By 1981, William is in high school, clashing with a local bully named Tony (Eden), and plotting evil. His classmate Julie (McAllen) doesn't yet realize that she is the re-born archangel Gabriel.

When Andrew decides to summon the living dead on the night of a passion play about the crucifixion of Christ, Margaret must mentor Julie, and the Devil must be stopped ... or else.

COMMENTARY: *Fear No Evil* is an odd, disjointed, and off-putting horror film. It suggests that Satan and the Archangels are not only re-born as humans occasionally, but that—as luck should have it—Gabriel and Lucifer attend the same high school. This paves the way for an inventive “death by dodgeball” moment.

Part of the film is a “worm turns”—style wrath movie like *Evilspeak* (1982) or *Trick or Treat* (1986), with a whisper-thin dork delivering revenge upon bullies, and part of the film is a religious epic like *The Omen* films ... only on a no-frills budget.

And on top of all that, as my wife Kathryn pointed out during our screening, Lucifer (as he appears in the prologue) has love handles.

One element that might have brought all this diverse material under an umbrella of unity is effective characterization. None of the characters in the film are very memorable, and many of the young people are downright cruel, foul-mouthed and vapid. I must admit, however, I did enjoy the moment in which Lucifer makes his enemy, the bully named Tony, grow tits.

As for the re-born angels, it's difficult to comprehend why neither they nor Lucifer are brought back to Earth with any knowledge of who they are and what they're doing there. I, for one, refuse to believe that God is such a bad planner. Also, it would have been infinitely preferable if *Fear No Evil* had picked one character (either William or Julia, I don't care which) and then stuck with them for the duration instead of featuring what can only be termed a rather diffuse focus.

Perhaps the finest and most interesting element of *Fear No Evil* is the hard-rockin' soundtrack from the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, and the B-52s. If evil had a soundtrack, it would sound like this.

Finally, *Fear No Evil* ends in what can only be described as a free-for-all. Evoking *Night of the Living Dead*, a few zombies are raised, lightning strikes here and there, and a school play (about the crucifixion) is ruined. That's the best the Devil can muster?

“This is a catastrophe!” a radio reporter intones during his broadcast. That’s an accurate assessment of *Fear No Evil*.

The Final Conflict: Omen III

★ ★

Critical Reception

“[This movie] appeared to finish off the trilogy, but was so inept as to be scarcely worth mentioning within the context of the other two.”—Tom Hutchinson, Roy Pickard, *Horrors: A History of Horror Movies*, Chartwell Books, Inc., 1984, page 90.

“Dandychrist. Dandychrist. Watch the film. You’ll hear that word dozens of times. The least effective of the *Omen* film should have been a winner. Sam Neill does a fine job as Damien all grown up. But the creators of this film didn’t pay attention to the mythology of their own series—which is why there are at least two book sequels to what was supposed to have been ... well, a final conflict (you’re supposed to kill the Anti-Christ with all the daggers in the shape of a cross, not just one). Jerry Goldsmith pulls out all the stops, trying to fix this film with his lush score, but it doesn’t work. And Pink Floyd may find a few similarities between Goldsmith’s main theme and ‘Where the Tigers Broke Free’—a reject from ‘The Wall.’ As for this film, it was the stinker of the series.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

“The hapless scenarist, Andrew Birkin—and you have to extend a measure of sympathy to anyone asked to write something intelligent on this subject—goes for broke. His screenplay is a triumph of claptrap, teeming with homicidal monks armed with knives ... and dogs that do Satan’s bidding. And what a dog *The Final Conflict* is.”—Desmond Ryan, “*The Final Conflict* is Horrid, Not Horrifying,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 23, 1983, page C04.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sam Neill (Damien Thorn); Rossano Pazzi (Father De Carlo); Don Gordon (Harvey Dean); Lisa Harrow (Kate Reynolds); Barnaby Holm (Peter); Mason Adams (The President); Robert Arden (The American Ambassador); Leueen Willoughby (Barbara); Marc Boyle (Brother Benita); Milos Kirek (Brother Martin); Tommy Duggan (Brother Matthews); Louis Mahoney (Brother Paolo); Richard Oldfield (Brother Simeon); Tony Vogel (Brother Antonio); Arwen Holm (Carol);

Hugh Maxey (Manservant); William Fox (Diplomat); Norman Bird (Dr. Philmore); Richard Williams (Vicar); Arnold Diamond (Astronomer).

CREW: A Harvey Bernhard Production, in association with Mace Neufeld. *Film Editor:* Alan Strachan. *Production Design:* Herbert Westbrook. *Associate Producer:* Andrew Birkin. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Conducted by:* Lionel Newman. *Directors of Photography:* Robert Paynter, Phil Meheux. *Executive Producer:* Richard Donner. *Written by:* Andrew Birkin. *Based on characters created by:* David Seltzer. *Producer:* Harvey Bernhard. *Casting:* Maude Spector. *Makeup:* Freddie Williamson. *Special Effects Supervisor:* Ian Wingrove. *Directed by:* Graham Baker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

P.O.V

“We are in Armageddon today. Evil is certainly explicit in the world with man’s inhumanity to man ... Just take a look at the world today, country by country, ruler by ruler, political system by political system, and you can see the world in absolute chaos ... And unless a savior does come in the next couple of years, we’re going to be finished.”⁸—*The Final Conflict*’s producer, Harvey Bernhard, discusses the film’s context.

INCANTATION: “Most people confuse evil with their own trivial lusts and perversions. True evil is as pure as innocence.”—Damien’s philosophy of evil, from the final film in the *Omen* trilogy, Graham Baker’s *The Final Conflict*.

SYNOPSIS: Thirty-two-year-old Damien Thorn (Neill), the Anti-Christ, accepts the position of American ambassador to Great Britain after using supernatural means to cause the death of his predecessor. Meanwhile, a sect of dedicated priests in Subiaco, Italy, led by Father De Carlo (Pazzi) arms itself with the recently unearthed daggers of Megiddo, the only weapons that can destroy the Devil’s son.

While Damien romances a TV news anchor named Kate (Harrow) and befriends her son, Peter (Holm), a constellation called Trinity joins in the sky, heralding the Second Coming of Christ on Earth. Realizing that his enemy, the Nazarene, has come to bring about the End of Days, Damien orders all children born on March 24—the day of Christ’s return—murdered. Meanwhile, one priest after the other fails in his bid to kill Damien, and the final conflict between the Beast’s Son and God’s own progeny draws near.

COMMENTARY: *The Final Conflict: Omen III* ends with the Rapture, the arrival of Jesus Christ on Earth on Judgment Day. A feeling of

rapture is no doubt what many viewers felt when this second sequel to 1976's surprise hit, *The Omen*, wound to its bizarre conclusion.

Though the Graham Baker film is buttressed by a strong cast (especially Sam Neill), a rousing and bombastic Jerry Goldsmith score, and some excellent photography (particularly in a breathtaking fox hunt), the project just never really comes together. *Damien: Omen II* (1978) wasn't a particularly good picture either, but at least it was enlivened (just like the original Gregory Peck feature) by graphic, elaborate murder set pieces. *The Final Conflict* leaves even that modest legacy behind, and several big horror scenes—when not downright botched—don't hold up to critical scrutiny.



Pray for deliverance! A desperate monk (Rossano Brazzi)—with the seven knives of Megiddo arranged on the altar before him—leads a brotherhood of (incompetent) monks into battle against the Anti-Christ in *The Final Conflict*.

Consider, for instance, the sequence late in the film following the picturesque fox hunt. Damien is outside alone, save for his hunting dogs and horses, and therefore vulnerable to attack. Two priests armed with the appropriate daggers (though it's supposed to take all seven to kill the Anti-Christ) close in on their prey, but instead of striking simultaneously, they attack one at a time so Damien can rouse

the horses and dogs to stop them. I understand hedging your bets and wanting to take on the Anti-Christ *mano-a-mano*, but, heck, two priests—attacking at once—could have taken Damien down. The problem with “good” in this film is simply that it’s too afraid of evil, and too tame in confronting it.

Another set piece that goes horribly astray and wanders into unintended comedy involves an assassination attempt on Damien when he’s giving a live interview to Kate on the TV news. The assassin botches his attempt and ends up swinging upside down from a rope through the big shooting studio. Then, adding insult to injury, he catches fire. The sequence feels like it came out of a Peter Sellers *Pink Panther* movie instead of the *Omen* franchise. It’s plain silly, and daffily staged.

The Final Conflict doesn’t boast the courage to focus on what it really concerns, either. Late in the film, fearing the arrival of Christ, Damien sets in motion a pogrom to kill all babies born on March 24. Seventeen infants die in a week, the audience is told, but not one of these babies is actually seen in the film. Of course, baby murdering is a pretty unsavory topic, but *The Final Conflict* brought it up, and this is supposed to be a horror film, right? The Anti-Christ is a baby-killer, why shirk from that and hide the babies off-screen?



Embrace of evil: Damien Thorn (Sam Neill) recruits a young boy (Barnaby Holm) to his unholy cause, while in the background,

the boy's concerned mother, a journalist (Lisa Harrow), looks on.

Sam Neill is a potent actor, and he makes a strong villain in the film. Damien is an odd bird, and the film's very best (and most perverse) scene graphically illustrates some of the Anti-Christ's more unsavory tastes. To wit, Damien takes Kate to bed, and treats her roughly in the sack.

"I feel like a moth who's flown too close to the flame," she breathlessly reports during the act, then begs him to fuck her hard, pleading with him not to stop. At this entreaty—and I still can't believe I saw this in a major studio franchise film—Damien rolls Kate over on her stomach and proceeds to sodomize her while lecturing her about pain.

Yes, you read that right, the Anti-Christ forces anal sex on the film's female protagonist. Kate wakes up the next morning with bruises and scratches all over her body, and it's really kinda kinky. This may sound radical, even unimportant overall, but this intimate scene better explains Damien's personality than any other in the film. He *enjoys* hurting others—he derives pleasure from it—and he's manipulative. The reason he thrives, however, is that there are those who find his evil alluring, and tremendously sexy. Kate is one of those people. To her—as in Gothic literature—evil is both repellent and attractive, and that two-edged sword comes across clearly in *The Final Conflict*.

Notice the manner in which the film posits Armageddon in the 1980s—during the Reagan era—a time of “economic crisis,” “chaos” and “great recession” according to the filmmakers. This is funny because this is how some officials in the Reagan administration actually viewed the age too! On February 5, 1981, future Secretary of the Interior James Watt, when asked about the country’s natural resources, replied that he did not know “how many future generations” we could count on “before the Lord returns.” In 1980, while on the campaign trail, Reagan similarly had noted (to televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker) that ours “might be the generation that sees Armageddon.” He reinforced belief in this point of view in an interview with *People Magazine* in December 1983, when the commander-in-chief stated that this was the first time in history that so many Biblical prophecies were coming together.

So, in its own wacky sense, *The Final Conflict: Omen III* reflects its time, and taps into the fears—or perhaps hope—of some very

powerful people. It's still not a particularly good film, though, even when seen through the lens of current events and the prevailing *Zeitgeist*.

LEGACY: Although the advent of the Rapture would seemingly preclude further installments of *The Omen*, it's tough to keep a hard-working Anti-Christ down. In 1991, Fox aired a made-for-TV sequel to *The Final Conflict*. Starring Faye Grant, *Omen IV: The Awakening* featured a new Anti-Christ, Damien's daughter, Delia.

A remake of the original *Omen* film, titled simply *The Omen* (2006), features Liev Schrieber inheriting the Gregory Peck role and Mia Farrow as the evil nanny, Mrs. Baylock.

The Anti-Christ also showed up on Fox TV a second time (what is it with Fox TV and Pure Evil, anyway?) in a 2005 horror soap opera called *Point Pleasant*. Here the Anti-Christ was a gorgeous teenager who had the symbol of the Devil (666) emblazoned on her eyeball! The series was cancelled after just a handful of episodes.

Final Exam



Cast and Crew

CAST: Cecile Bagdad (Courtney); Joel S. Rice (Radish); Ralph Brown (Wildman); Deanna Robbins (Lisa); Sherry Willis-Burch (Janet); John Fallon (Mark); Terry W. Farren (Pledge); Timothy L. Raynor (Killer); Sam Kilman (Sheriff); Don Hepner (Dr. Reynolds); Mary Ellen Withers (Elizabeth); Jerry Rushing (Coach); R.C. Nanney (Mitch).

CREW: *Presented by:* MPM. *Executive Producers:* John L. Chambliss, Lon J. Kerr, Michael Mahern. *Producers:* John L. Chambliss, Myron Meisel. *Film Editor:* John A. O'Connor. *Director of Photography:* Darrell Cathcart. *Music Composed by:* Gary Scott. *Written and Directed by:* Jimmy Huston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Senseless murders are a modern phenomenon."—A line from *Final Exam* (1981).

SYNOPSIS: A mad killer (Raynor) hacks up a quarterback and his girlfriend while they are parked lakeside at March College. Days later, at nearby Lanier College during final exam week, the killer prowls again. The police aren't certain murders are being committed,

however, because fraternity pranksters Mark (Fallon) and Wildman (Brown) staged a fake terrorist attack and the gullible, serial-killer obsessed geek, Radish (Rice), called the police.

Now they think he is just crying wolf when he telephones again to tell them that students are being murdered left and right. A studious friend of Radish, Courtney (Bagdad) discovers Radish's corpse and flees her nearly empty dorm, the killer in hot pursuit. The knife-wielding psycho pursues her to the top of a tower's spiral staircase, and it is there that they have a final confrontation.

COMMENTARY: *Final Exam* was filmed in Shelby, North Carolina, not far from my neck of the woods here in Monroe, so I'm going easy on the film. In short, this is one of three slasher films released in 1981 that utilizes a college campus and its surrounding milieu as its organizing principle.

This isn't the worst of the three (*Graduation Day*). Nor is it the best (*The Dorm that Dripped Blood*). Not a one of this bunch is as much fun as '82's college horror film starring Linda Blair, *Hell Night*. Instead, *Final Exam*'s merely your average, down-home, low-budget independent horror film produced far from Hollywood, and one that exploits "college" as the organizing principle. This grants it access to such common ingredients as finals week, dorms, fraternity pranks, a lover's lane location, and a cafeteria.

The stock, Izod-shirt-wearing characters in this film, including the quarterback (nicknamed, inevitably, Wildman), the "boy who cried wolf" (named Radish), the whore-cheerleader, and the final girl (Courtney) come straight from the slasher shelf. As does the *coup de grâce* (which occurs in a weight room), the breast unveiling, a lengthy final chase which takes Courtney back and forth across the campus grounds, and finally the sting in the tale/tail, which requires Courtney to do some heavy duty stabbing.

So why does *Final Exam* merit two stars? Unlike *Graduation Day*, at least there are no musical interludes here, so that's worth half-a-star. More pertinently, for a distinctly low-budget film, *Final Exam*'s director stages some wonderfully effective and interesting shots. For instance, the killer doesn't wear a uniform (like a mask and jumpsuit), but instead, his face is deliberately shadowed throughout, making his identity a mystery. There's also a couple interesting instances where the rack focus suddenly brings the killer's form into crystal clarity. In one, he's standing on a distant ledge, just a black shadow. In another, Courtney stands in the background, and the rack focus brings the

killer into focus in the frame's background. These moments crystallize the idea of a killer who appears out of nowhere, surprising his victims.

Unless one is terribly interested in the arcane rites of "pinning" and hazing, not much of depth occurs in *Final Exam*. One ingredient worth noting is the film's utter lack of explanation regarding the serial killer. The audience never learns who he is, or why he's killing, and there's something oddly realistic and effective about this *modus operandi*. It's as though these kids become ensnared in a spider's web, without explanation, without motivation. Along with some clever photography, this ambiguous aspect of *Final Exam* differentiates the film from its multitudinous classmates.

Friday the 13th Part II



Critical Reception

"The bulk of the proceedings are a grab bag of genre clichés ... degenerating into an ending where reality and fantasy are so blurred as to render the whole thing virtually incomprehensible."—Ken Hanke, *A Critical Guide to Horror Film Series*, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991, page 298.

"Virtually a remake of the first film, starting with a long flashback to it; short sharp shocks punctuate stabs of tedium."—Leslie Halliwell, Editor, *Halliwell's Film Guide*, Seventh Edition, Harper and Row, 1991, page 378.

"Okay, Jason's really alive (which makes you wonder why his mom was so pissed off in the first one), and the series we all know and love (when there's *nothing* else playing on TV or at the local multiplex) is born, all except for the hockey mask. We don't know why Jason's so darn indestructible, other than the *Friday the 13th* movies like surprise stings at the ends of their movies, and showing him alive after he'd been killed is pretty common. In the series, this movie is actually pretty good—Jason has some of the old Leatherface mystique about him. And he hadn't quite turned into unintentional parody at this point, but the victims were already starting to get annoying."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

"[The movie] defies probability by being a good deal worse than its predecessor."—David Robinson, *The Times*, June 19, 1981, page 15.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Amy Steel (Ginny); John Furey (Paul); Adrienne King (Alice); Kirsten Baker (Terry); Stu Charno (Ted); Warrington Gillette (Jason); Walt Gorney (Ralph); Marta Kober (Sandra); Tom McBride (Mark); Bill Randolph (Jeffrey); Lauren-Marie Taylor (Vickie); Russell Todd (Scott); Betsy Palmer (Mrs. Voorhees); Cliff Cudney (Max); Jack Marks (The Cop).

CREW: *Director of Photography:* Peter Stein. *Production Design:* Virginia Field. *Casting:* Simon and Kumin. *Special Makeup Effects:* Carl Fullerton. *Music:* Henry Manfredini. *Executive Producers:* Toni Gruenberg, Lisa Barsamian. *Associate Producer:* Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Film Editor:* Susan E. Cunningham. *Co-Producer:* Dennis Murphy. *Written by:* Ron Kurz. *Based on Characters Created by:* Victor Miller. *Produced and Directed by:* Steve Miner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two months after Mrs. Voorhees' (Palmer) massacre at Camp Blood, her deformed, murderous son Jason (Gillette) tracks down and kills the only survivor, Alice (King). Five years later, Paul (Furey) opens a training facility for camp counselors near Crystal Lake and Jason begins killing off the counselors in gruesome fashion. A boy in a wheelchair (McBride) gets a machete in the face, two lovers are speared while in bed together, and soon only the resourceful Ginny (Steel) is left. But as she flees the murders, she stumbles upon Jason's house in the woods and discovers a shrine to his decapitated mother.

COMMENTARY: True, there's very little that's original about *Friday the 13th Part II*, Steve Miner's sequel to Sean Cunningham's ultra-popular original 1980 movie. Yet on the other hand, hold the criticism and consider that old adage that only seven original stories exist anyway. In the final analysis, especially in a slasher series like *Friday the 13th*, originality is irrelevant. Instead, a film such as this must be assessed on the basis of how scary it is, and how it plays with the slasher paradigm that was so popular. On both fronts, *Part II* is nearly the equal of the tense, frenetic *Friday the 13th*, lobbing its tricks and treats like hand grenades, with a delightful kind of low-budget, straight-faced aplomb.

First off, there's some unfinished business to clean up. Alice (Adrienne King) survived the first film, so—as slasher convention demands—she must be the first victim in the encore. The audience is first notified of Jason's arrival at Alice's house by heavy footsteps landing in a puddle outside. Inside, meanwhile, Alice is still tortured by her experience at

the camp, so naturally she puts a kettle of water on the stove and then prepares to take a shower. The loud ring of the telephone phone startles her and it's a hang-up. Relief. A cat jumps into view and startles Alice again, and the realization dawns on the audience that the movie is having some good, clean, scary fun at its expense. Then there's the kill, and it's a gory humdinger: an ice-pick to the brain.

Dissected, this prologue makes little or no sense. Is Jason prank calling his victims now? Also, when Jason enters Alice's house, he takes the hot kettle off the stove, which seems distinctly unlike this particular killer, doesn't it? But no matter, the point is established from the first frame that the movie has us where it wants us, and director Steve Miner plays us like the proverbial fiddle.

The "new" story of *Friday the 13th Part II* is essentially the old story from Part One. Only substitute a camp for aspiring counselors for counselors at Camp Blood, and put in an angry Jason (wearing a potato sack over his head) for the vengeful Mrs. Voorhees. Amy Steel is introduced as Ginny, our final girl and heroine, and the only person who seems to have an inkling of the nearby danger. She's more resourceful than Alice and nearly upstages even Laurie Strode during the film's tense finale, wherein she brazenly dresses up as Jason's dead mother and starts barking orders at the confused serial killer.



And they say he's still alive somewhere out there ... in the woods. A campfire group shot in *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981). Center, left to right, wheelchair-bound Mark (Tom McBride), Vickie (Lauren-Marie Taylor), Paul (John Furey) and final girl Ginny (Amy Steel).

Crazy Ralph, the Cassandra-like old man whose dire warnings went unheeded in *Friday the 13th*, is back in this film, and his warnings go similarly unnoted here. Some useless authority in the form of the cops show up, and the “vice precedes slice-and-dice” dynamic recurs when weed is trotted out. Sex is also represented with a nude skinny dip, and there’s a frenetic, exciting final chase and a sting in the tail/tale too, but all of this material is vetted with a high level of energy. This sequel rocks and rolls along with hardly any time for viewers to consider the inconsistencies.

And there are some inconsistencies; ones which reveal that this series is built on a very shaky storyline indeed. Consider that Mrs. Voorhees went on a killing spree in 1980 (the year of the first film) because her boy, Jason, drowned in 1958. In the sequel, it’s 1985, and Jason is avenging the murder of his mother in 1980. But if Jason didn’t drown, Mrs. Voorhees would have had no reason to attack Alice and her friends, right? It makes no sense at all.

But again, who cares?

This movie has more jolts than your average shock treatment session. And director Miner does a great job staging the attacks. In one scene, Steele hides in the foreground of a shot, ahead of a parked car while Jason passes in the background, looking in her direction. Does he see her? The audience isn’t sure, but again, proximity is important in movies like this, and any time a director can get a final girl and a killer in the same shot—but not seeing one another—the tension is ramped way up.

The kills in this film are also amongst the best in the series. There’s a famous one involving a spear jutting through two lovers bodies at once, striking the floor after going through the living flesh and the mattress. And then there’s the gorgeously macabre moment that occurs during a raging lightning storm when Mark gets a machete in his face, and his wheelchair rolls down a long staircase, out of control.

Another “jolt” moment involves the movie’s first real full-on view of

Jason as he slides out from under a bed, where he's been waiting for his prey. Jason is ferocious and fast-moving in this entry, and this scene plays like something out of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

The first *Friday the 13th* is artistically made and original, after a fashion, and there are no grounds like that on which to praise *Part II*. It's much more difficult to defend on critical terms, except to state that the film gets the job done with efficiency: It's scary. The characters are not yet so broad that they're laughable. The characters are also still likable enough that the audience isn't watching the movie just to see them die. You want Ginny and the others to escape Jason, and the primary emotion here is still fear, not an ugly pandering to voyeurism.

The Funhouse



Critical Reception

"This lively shocker is [mostly] formula shock, although noisier, better-paced and better-edited than most.... The finale in the engine-room is really imaginative and throws in everything but the kitchen sink, and the pace leaves no one time to go to the loo."—David Quinlan, *The Illustrated Guide to Film Directors*, Barnes & Noble Books, 1983, page 145.

"While the director, Tobe (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) Hooper, ought to have moved on to better things, he is the master of this gore-and-sadism genre ... The film features an excruciatingly tense final confrontation..."—*People Weekly*, April 27, 1981.

"*The Funhouse* doesn't trade on gratuitous and graphic gore, but it doesn't have to. In little ways and using the traditional tried and true devices of the genre ... it skillfully heightens expectations [and] nicely evokes the chiller of a bygone era as it pays respect to Hitchcock and James Whale..."—Alex Keneas, *Newsday*, March 13, 1981, page 7.

"I don't think I've ever discussed this film with anyone, because I don't think I've ever spoken to anyone who's seen it, and that's a shame, because this is a good Tobe Hooper film. The grit of carnivals is in the film, a fetching young leading lady, some standard era clichés, and a harrowing finale makes for one of Hooper's most satisfying films. There's a little bit of *Deliverance* here, a little bit of a slasher film, but it's really its own animal. Some of the

cinematography, night shots of a deserted carnival, are downright disturbing. If you've never seen this film, you've missed something. See it, so we can talk about it."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

"You *almost* have to admire a film that references *Psycho* and *Halloween* within its first 60 seconds. But that doesn't necessarily make it clever, or even particularly scary. Released seven years after his ferocious and seminal *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and one year before his Spielberg-driven, f/x-heavy *Poltergeist*, *The Funhouse* is a film whose plot probably looked better on the initial drawing board. The concept of a malevolent carnny spook-house certainly has promise, but the realization is compromised by unappealing teen leads and—even more damaging—an unconvincing monster. Hooper remains the Orson Welles of horror films, a director whose first feature confounded accepted rules of the genre (and forever traumatized audiences), but who has since failed to match or recreate the experience, in either a critical, artistic, or commercial sense."—Sam Shapiro, guest columnist, *The Charlotte Observer*, film instructor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Cooper Huckabee (Buzz); Miles Chapin (Ritchie); Largo Woodruff (Liz); Sylvia Miles (Madame Zena); William Finley (Mario the Magnificent); Elizabeth Berridge (Amy); Kevin Conway (The Barker); Wayne Doba (The Monster); Shawn Carson (Joey Harper); Jeanne Austin (Mrs. Harper); Jack McDermott (Mr. Harper); David Carson (Geek); Sonia Zomina (Bag Lady); Ralph Marino (Truck Driver); Herb Robins (Carnival Manager); Susie Malniki (Carmella).

CREW: Universal, an MCA Company, Presents a Mace Neufeld Production in Association with Derek Power, a Tobe Hooper Film. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Associate Producer:* Brad Neufeld. *Music:* John Beal. *Film Editor:* Jack Hofstra. *Production Designer:* Morton Rabinowitz. *Director of Photography:* Andrew Laszlo. *Executive Producers:* Mace Neufeld, Mark L. Lester. *Written by:* Larry Block. *Produced by:* Derek Power, Steven Bernhardt. *Special Makeup Design:* Rick Baker. *Special Makeup Execution:* Craig Reardon. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Teenager Amy Harper (Berridge) and her older boyfriend, Buzz (Huckabee), join two friends, Ritchie (Chapin) and Liz (Woodruff), at a carnival passing through town. The four teens move from the freak show to the tent of fortune teller Madame Zena (Miles),

who warns Amy that her “fate” line ends badly and that a tall, dark stranger will change her life.

After visiting the stripper show and a magic show, the teens decide to spend the night in the funhouse, an attraction overseen by a creepy fellow wearing a Frankenstein Monster mask.

Once inside, the teens see the quarters of the Barker (Conway), as Madame Zena and the Frankenstein Monster engage in a sleazy transaction. When it goes badly, the Monster chokes Zena, killing her ... and the kids are witnesses. Making matters worse, Ritchie goes down into the quarters and steals the night’s receipts from the Barker’s lockbox.

But locked in, they are quickly discovered by the Barker and the Frankenstein Monster, who is the Barker’s deformed, mutant son. The Barker and his offspring hunt down the teens, killing Ritchie and Liz first. Buzz attempts to defend Amy from the Barker, but before long Amy is left alone in the bowels of the carnival’s funhouse to face the monster.

COMMENTARY: *The Funhouse*, sometimes known as *Carnival of Terror*, is a reflexive horror movie before such things were popular with audiences. Though Tobe Hooper’s fellow horror maven, Wes Craven, is generally acknowledged as the genre’s Pirandello, shattering the fourth wall in *Shocker* (1989), Wes Craven’s *New Nightmare* (1994) and the *Scream* trilogy (1996–99), Hooper also architected one of the masterpieces of self-reflexive horror in *The Funhouse*, a film that knowingly and cleverly dances on two levels of meaning. On its “surface” level, *The Funhouse* is a dead teenager movie like *Halloween*, *Scream* or *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997).

On a deeper and more meaningful thematic level, however, this is a film *about* horror films in general and in particular about the glut of “dead teenagers” inhabiting American cinemas in the early eighties. Accordingly, the film’s plot mirrors the subgenre: four teenagers (two girls; two guys; only moderately likable, even distinguishable) visit a traveling carnival and decide to spend the night in a spooky funhouse. Unfortunately, they meddle with the carnies and witness a murder, forcing the malevolent Barker and his deformed son to hunt them down. It sounds like a simple premise, and it is. Yet that “under” level is present too, that reflexive one. This thematic layer finds voice in the fact that the film follows these teenagers from carnival attraction to carnival attraction for a long time (roughly twenty minutes), sending them to the on-screen equivalent of a horror movie. That gives Hooper

the opportunity to make a horror entertainment about horror entertainment.

Sometimes the teens are frightened by what they see (at a magic show seemingly gone bloodily wrong), sometimes they are stimulated by the sights (at a stripper's tent) and sometimes they are amused and mystified (at the fortune teller's tent). But by sending his protagonists on this extended odyssey of entertainment, Hooper is mirroring the moviegoing experience and, with jolts in all the right places, the horror movie experience in particular.



The masked killer strikes during a shower. Or does he? Amy (Elizabeth Berridge) is the victim of a practical joke in Tobe Hooper's *The Funhouse* (1981).

So many of Hooper's films involve a "double" image, the so-called normal world and the creepy, dangerous "world underneath" that exist side by side. In some ways, the world of moviemaking is similarly bifurcated by a double image: the twin pillars of reality and illusion. Images on film appear one way (real) but are actually false. Actors read lines and live real lives beyond the screen yet for ninety minutes appear to be characters in a play.

In *The Funhouse*, the carnival, like the moviemaking process, is a

collision of illusions and reality. In the opening scene (following the credits), the camera adopts the subjective point of view of a stalker. This unseen killer puts on a clown mask, grabs a butcher knife and proceeds to hunt his prey, a girl in the shower. This beginning is clearly designed as homage to the opening scene of *Halloween* (Michael Myers' murder of his older sister), but it is much more than that.

When the killer, whose eyes the audience shares, attacks young protagonist Amy in the shower (yet another homage, this time to the genre's progenitor, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*), the point of view vantage is abandoned and the audience sees that the "killer" is just a child, Amy's brother, pulling a prank. The knife is rubber, the boy's intent not homicidal, merely jovial. The audience subconsciously relaxes, but the point is made: It is not always easy to discern reality from illusion, especially in movies. This will prove critical for many of the characters in the film as the story develops.

The Funhouse is packed with such revelations. An adult stranger in a pick-up truck offers Joey a ride to the carnival, then pulls a rifle on the boy. Then he laughs and drives away, leaving the boy unharmed. Like Joey, he is a trickster too, appearing kindly one moment, then dangerous, and finally harmless again. What is the truth? The audience isn't certain and so the scene comes off as unsettling, unpredictable, full of ominous foreboding.

Once at the carnival, *The Funhouse* continues this reflexive structure, taking its characters to a horror movie within a larger horror movie. To wit, they visit a freak show with deformed, two-headed cows and the corpse of a mutant fetus. The teens laugh at these anomalies: They're behind ropes or in containers and thus, like the remote images displayed on the silver screen, deemed harmless.

At the magic show, a carnie dressed as a vampire (*Eaten Alive*'s William Finley) seemingly kills a young girl, an audience volunteer, when he drives a wooden stake through her heart. But this only appears to be so (as do the carefully orchestrated, graphic deaths in movies such as *Friday the 13th*). The girl is actually the magician's assistant, in the know the whole time, and the blood is merely makeup, the stake but a prop. In these sequences of perceived reality turning "safely" to entertainment, the viewer of the film (like the four teens at the carnival) get suckered into relaxing, into a kind of comfort zone. Nothing here is real. Nothing here can hurt you.

And then and only then does Hooper deliver his whammy. Suddenly

the seemingly safe becomes rigorously unsafe. The turning point is Madame Zena's tent. Amy has her fortune revealed there and the gypsy woman speaks in a flowery, stereotypical fortune teller-style accent. But when angered by her customers, Zena lets the artifice slip and becomes her true self: a venomous, nasty woman of low accent and filthy vocabulary. Here it is the performance of geniality that is a sham. It is the illusion that is safe; the truth that is so dangerous. The scene ends in terrifying fashion as Zena's crystal ball, of its own volition, rolls to her hands. The implication is that her affability is an act but her strange abilities are not. Scarily, she has noted that Amy has knowledge of the occult, and naturally, it is Amy all along who sees terror in the reappearing face of the Barker.

From this point, everything that should be safe is merely an illusion and the danger to the teens transforms into reality. The Barker's son wears a Frankenstein Monster mask, a symbol of horror homogenized and made acceptable in American culture. It is a safe, familiar image, seen in old movies, on TV reruns, and lampooned throughout our culture. Underneath it, however, reality is much worse than this mainstream visage of horror seems to indicate. Or, as film scholar Brian Kawin wrote:

[T]he monster has been wearing a Frankenstein mask, a downright brilliant gesture, not just because the Frankenstein Monster is the correct prototype (the child rejected by his creator and looking for love) but because with the mask on he appears part of the normal world, the world that includes horror images as elements in its playground. Now the father criticizes him so harshly that the son tears off his mask and confronts him with what he is. The horror, the audience discovers, is real.⁹

In other words, a mass market, cultural image of acceptable horror (of a long-lived, famous monster) has been drafted to cloak a real terror, to lull the living into a sense of false security. In the ultimate reversal of reality and illusion, three of the nosy teens are killed in the funhouse, becoming part of the rides and attractions inside the chamber, taking their places beside the "safe" animatronic horror of the carnival. After Ritchie is killed, he is displayed on a rolling funhouse car, an axe jutting out of his head. He's become part of the scenery, like the macabre ghouls who bend and speak and wave their mechanical arms at visitors at the fair. Hooper's point is that this is no longer a joke, no longer artifice. Reality is terrifying, illusion comforting, but each can be incorrectly perceived. In the Janus-like 1980s, this is no small point.

The Funhouse is also a reflexive film in another very specific way. It draws a direct parallel to the Frankenstein mythos in that images of the popular, revered monster appear virtually everywhere. There is a poster of the Monster in Joey's bedroom. He plays with a Frankenstein Monster action figure. *Bride of Frankenstein* is playing on TV in Amy's living room and, of course, the carnie mutant wears a mask of the famous horror icon. All these references are apt for different reasons. In his affection for horror movies and "scary" moments, Joey has been made a monster himself: pulling nasty tricks on his unsuspecting older sister.

He is associated with the Frankenstein Monster twice: in his choice of bedroom decoration and his selection of toys. Like others in the film then (including the often-misled audience), Joey seems to have some difficulty in separating reality from illusion. For him, the monster is a hero, but he learns in his encounter with a real monster (the mutant cloaked as the Frankenstein Monster) that such creatures are not to be admired.

As for Amy, in a very real way she becomes the bride of Frankenstein as the film unspools. She is the only survivor of the beast's murderous onslaught and her prized status as a virgin makes her the only suitable object for the mutant's affections. He may be attracted to seductresses like Liz (who tricks him using sex) or Madame Zena (whom he pays for sex) but it is the virgin Amy he lavishes his most special attention on. Accordingly, throughout the film, violence is associated with the mutant's sexual desires. He prematurely ejaculates with Zena (a scene re-played with Leatherface and a chainsaw in Hooper's *Chainsaw 2* [1986]) and in his rage he damages a fuse box, causing electricity to course through the room. These ejaculatory sparks bring animatronic figures to life and physically embody his rage.

The same thing happens again in the finale when he confronts Amy. When he dies in pursuit of her an orgasm of electricity jolts the underground chamber. This is an important link to Mary Shelley's creation because in Frankenstein movies it is electricity that brings life to the Monster in the first place. In *The Funhouse*, electrical discharge is likewise associated with life and death, a physical side effect of the creature's lustful desires.

Amy has something else in common with the frightening and deformed antagonist of *The Funhouse*. She is "his bride" because she is, like him, the unhappy child of dysfunctional parents. Like the Monster, she is a virgin, desiring to experience (with Buzz) the joys of sex while simultaneously afraid of sex's power over her. The

Frankenstein motif thus links protagonist and antagonist much in the way Laurie Strode's desires for a "man" in *Halloween* link her to Michael Myers. In some senses these characters (Amy and the Monster) are two sides of the same coin, only Amy grew up in a so-called normal family while the mutant grew up in an unstable, mobile, abnormal one. But both want more than what their parents can give them (jobs, life in a small town). Just as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* depicted mirror images of American families (the Hardestys and the Leatherface clan), so does *The Funhouse* show a similar reflection by putting Amy in opposition with the Monster.

Besides the unusual bond between Amy and her mirror image, the Monster, *The Funhouse* features relationships that are often highlighted in Hooper's work. The bickering siblings, Amy and Joey, are a slightly less extreme version of the unhappy siblings Franklin and Sally in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and in both cases it is the male of the duo who needs protecting and comes off as taunting and immature. Perhaps of more interest to avid Hooper scholars is the double villainy of *The Funhouse*. In much of his filmed work, Hooper likes his "evil" to be shared by two characters, a duo of danger (and sometimes, even a full family). One of the main baddies is always, to outward appearances, normal, while the other is somehow grotesque or abnormal. It is the "normal," human-looking evil who enables the "abnormal" evil to thrive.

In *Chain Saw*, Cook provides the raw material for Leatherface's cannibalistic cooking. In *Salem's Lot* it is the urbane, clever, well-dressed Straker (James Mason) who procures victims for the feral, green-skinned vampire named Barlow (Reggie Nalder). Likewise in *The Funhouse*: The seedy, sinister Barker protects and kills for his deformed son. And, like Cook in the *Chainsaw* films, this enabler claims to honor family values above all else, and even says that "blood is thicker than water." Although he is upset that his wayward son has killed Zena, a member of his extended carnival family, he stands by the boy. This dedication may arise in part because, like Cook, the Barker also clearly exploits his family ties. The Barker runs the funhouse and makes money off his boy (an able assistant) much as Cook runs a barbecue and later a catering business with Leatherface as his butcher. These "employees" must be protected at all costs or economic freedom will be sacrificed.

The reflexive structure of *The Funhouse* and the interesting character dynamics are only part of Hooper's overall tapestry. Visually and atmospherically, *The Funhouse* is one of the director's most creepy ventures. The images accompanying the opening credits are what the

hecklers of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* politely refer to as “good old-fashioned nightmare fodder.” In particular, the names of the film’s contributors are seen side by side with creepy carnival automatons (straight from the 1940s and 1950s). There’s one such robot swinging endlessly in a rocking chair, a chattering woman, a malevolent clown (later a symbol of fear in *Poltergeist*), a Humpty-Dumpty, a gorilla, an obese woman, and so forth, all pictured in irises and wipes and accompanied by horrific carnival music. It’s a distinctly disturbing note to open on, and a highly effective one.

Another nice visual touch is that all of the carnival “barkers” are portrayed (with light makeup alterations) by Kevin Conway, implying that there has been some pretty heavy in-breeding at this traveling fair. It might also be an indication that “greedy evil” has but one, sleazy face.

Two of the most effective visuals in the film occur late in the action. The first comes as the funhouse and the surrounding carnival tents are shut down for the night. The animatronic figures cycle down slowly and then grind to a halt. Lights turn off, giving way to ebony night, and the notion of being alone in the dark at that locale, among those freaky figures, is a terrifying one to contemplate. To heighten these feelings of doom and danger, Hooper stages a long, elaborate pull back from the funhouse. This is a steady shot, composed with stately elegance and chilly perfection. The camera eventually retreats so far that it reaches the carnival parking lot and captures the patrons as they get in their cars and drive away. The feeling of being left behind in the dark, in the company of evil, is palpable.

The climax is also quite powerful, and it is a sequence praised by critics. The scene builds to a fever pitch and ends on another note of reflexivity. As the mutant is finally killed, he joins the funhouse rides themselves. Chains and hooks move across the ceiling, big gears spin and the mutant is pulled apart by the ugly machinery, just another animatronic cog in an amusement park attraction. This sequence (bathed in a chilly blue light and peppered with white flashes of electricity) is some kind of genre high watermark of intensity, as ghoulish, disturbing and amusing as anything seen in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *Poltergeist*.

Taken on its own merits, *The Funhouse* is a great horror film, every bit the equal of *Halloween* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in meaning and use of effective film technique. But seen in the context of Hooper’s career, it picks up even more steam. The childhood obsession with magic and monsters, a facet of Hooper’s life characterized in

Poltergeist, *Salem's Lot* and *Invaders from Mars*, plays a big role here, particularly in Joey's bedroom accouterments. Likewise the constant homage evident in the film (to *Psycho*, to *Frankenstein*, to *Halloween*), is a near constant refrain in Hooper's oeuvre. And though the film does feature randy teenagers making out and taking off their clothes (you have to satisfy your core demographic, after all), it artfully examines and condemns the glut of dead teenager movies that it was accused of ripping off.

Galaxy of Terror (a.k.a. *Mindwarp*)

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[A] cunning rip-off of *Alien* ... [but] there’s no reason why a rip-off can’t be enjoyable as well.”—Darrell Moore, *The Best, Worst and Most Unusual: Horror Films*, Publications International, Ltd., 1983, page 74.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Edward Albert (Cabren); Erin Moran (Alluma), Ray Walston (Cook); Bernard Behrens (Ilvar); Zalman King (Baelon); Robert Englund (Ranger); Taaffe O’Connell (Dameia); Sid Haig (Quuhod); Grace Zabriskie (Trantor); Jack Blessing (Cos); Mary Ellen O’Neill (Mitri).

CREW: *Presented by:* New World Pictures. *Production Designers:* James Cameron, Robert Skotak. *Special Visual Effects:* Tom Campbell, Sara Nelson, Dennis Skotak. *Film Editors:* R.J. Kizer, Larry Bock, Barry Zetlin. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Music:* Barry Schrader. *Written by:* Marc Siegler, B.D. Clark. *Co-Producer:* Marc Siegler. *Producer:* Roger Corman. *Executive Producer:* Mary Ann Fisher. *Directed by:* B.D. Clark. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 76 minutes.

INCANTATION: “The human mind is still as dark as Morganthus.”—A proverb that is key to the riddle in *Galaxy of Terror*.

SYNOPSIS: The mystical Planet Master of Xerxes learns that a deep space mission has been imperiled on the distant world called Morganthus. He orders a rescue ship to investigate the crash of the *Remus*, but has a secret purpose for sending the crew. The roster includes Trantor, the only survivor of the Hesperus massacre a quarter century earlier, an empath named Alluma (Moran), a lowly cook and

others.

The *Quest* reaches Morganthus in short order and crashes on the rocky surface. The crew of the *Remus* is dead, and soon crew members on the *Quest* begin to die horribly too. The crew locates a strange, pyramidal edifice far away, but it feels, “empty, dead.” It is actually far from it, as the strange construction begins to plague the crew with manifestations of their worst fears. Only those able to manage their emotions and confront the dangers will survive, and ultimately, succeed the Planet Master ... who has arranged all of this.

COMMENTARY: In the landmark 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*, a spaceship crew learns that the invisible energy monster of Altair-4 is actually a “monster from the id,” one created from the subconscious mind of a scientist named Dr. Morbius (Walter Pidgeon), who has unwisely experimented with Krell technology to augment his mental abilities. This is a classic scenario in science fiction film history, and one that has been repeated frequently. The idea that the human mind can generate and materialize “external” fears and terrors is also the terrain of a low-budget Roger Corman horror flick from 1981, *Galaxy of Terror*.

In this film, directed by B.D. Clark, a diverse spaceship crew visits a “small world on the fringe of occupied space” called Morganthus and proceeds to explore a dark and imposing alien pyramid. A tell-tale sign that this enigmatic edifice represents the “interior” psychology of the crew is its bio-mimetic design: The corridors and rooms resemble organs like intestines, and there’s even one chamber that looks rather like a sphincter!

However, much more importantly, each character in the film dies because he or she is confronted with a personal fear that cannot be vanquished. The warrior played by Sid Haig (*The Devil’s Rejects* [2005]) claims he “lives and dies” by his crystal weaponry, and indeed, that assertion proves true when his crystals betray him. Erin Moran’s Counselor Troi-like empath similarly is confronted with her own internal terrors (a fear of alien rape). “It was my own fear that attacked me,” she admits, returning from the dead to help Albert’s character solve the riddle of Morganthus.



Courageous Cabren (Edward Albert), telepath Alluma (Erin Moran) and engineer Ranger (Robert Englund) explore the horrifying terrors within their own psychologies, in *Galaxy of Terror* (1981).

As the movie reveals during its climax, this strange alien pyramid creates as matter the fears of those who visit it, and this is the crucible—the test—through which all leaders (or Planet Masters) must pass if they are to reign over Xerxes. The only problem with this interesting set-up is that most of the doomed *dramatis personae* don't recognize that they're on a game field; that they are contestants in this particular contest. And really, who can blame them? The template of inner fears creating outer monsters isn't quite as cut and dried as it should be, or would have been in a more accomplished film.

For instance, why is Englund's Ranger (a smart character who realizes things “can't be real”) terrorized by a doppelganger? Does he fear himself more than anything else? One can understand why the commander is attacked by giant blood-sucking leeches ... they would scare anybody! But—again—are giant blood-sucking leeches really his personal, deep-seated fear? That's rather specific, and far-fetched. Given the alien pyramid and the dangers of space travel, more common fears might be confronting an alien intelligence, losing an oxygen supply in a vacuum, being trapped in a sealed chamber, or things like that. The monsters in *Galaxy of Terror* are grotesque and

convincing, but who on Earth (or Xerxes) would imagine those specific terrors as their worst nightmares?

Still, *Galaxy of Terror* represents a solid and welcome addition to the *Alien*-imitator sweepstakes of the 1980s because at its core rests a good, solid idea (and one now quite common given the popularity of Quantum Physics): How we imagine reality dictates the shape of reality. More so, the film isn't just a "creature feature" concerning itself with a slobbering monster killing people. On the contrary, there's actually the kernel of an original notion here: the "sword in the stone"-style test that will determine the succession of an Empire.

Despite choppy editing in spots (especially an all-too-brief opening deadly preamble), *Galaxy of Terror* brims with low-budget ingenuity and resourcefulness. The set designs and visuals are impressive, and even the miniatures look convincing for the age. The fast-paced first act eliminates some narrative questions in favor of the tense rush surrounding the lift-off and hyperspace jump to Morganthus. Even the acting is pretty good here; it's a dream B-movie cast between Albert, Walston, Haig, Englund, Zabriskie and *Happy Days* star Erin Moran.

Given the fine production values (contributed by designers James Cameron and Robert Skotak), its interesting, *Forbidden Planet*-inspired central conceit, and better-than-average execution, *Galaxy of Terror* is probably the best of *Alien*'s low-budget 1980s spawn.

Gates of Hell

(a.k.a. *City of the Living Dead*)

★ ★

Critical Reception

"Ever since Father Thomas hanged himself, Dunwich ain't been the same. Lucio Fulci's stomach-turning follow-up to *Zombie* opens in a cemetery in New England's legendary den of the damned, where a solemn priest has committed suicide. This is bad news for the locals: mirrors break suddenly, walls split open and bleed, maggots rain from the sky, and one poor woman spontaneously vomits an entire farm's worth of sheep intestines. Last but not least, all of the corpses buried in Dunwich return to life and start yanking out people's brains. For some reason, a New York City reporter and a psychic are the only ones who can save the town from eating itself. Their response: 'Good thing he didn't hang himself in Arlington.' It's unclear exactly how or why

the gates of hell have been opened, but Fabio Frizzi's hypnotic score and Fulci's typically over-the-top gore scenes make it easy to overlook the absence of plot."—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher George (Peter Bell); Kattriona MacColl (Mary); Carlo de Mejo (Gerry); Antonella Interlenghi (Emily Robbins); Giovanni Lombardo Radice (Bob); Daniela Doria (Rosie); Fabizio Jovine (Father Thomas); Luca Paisner (John); Michele Soavi (Tommy Fisher); Vanantino Venantini (Mr. Ross); Enzo De Ausilio (Deputy) Adelaide Aste (Theresa), Luciano Rossi, Robert Sampson, Janet Argren (Sandra).

CREW: *Story and Screenplay by:* Lucio Fulci, Dardano Sacchetti. *Design and costumes:* Massimo Antonello Geleng. *Makeup:* Franco Rufini. *Director of Photography:* Sergio Salvati. *Film Editor:* Vincenzo Tomassi. *Music:* Fabio Frizzi. *In charge of Production:* Giovanni Masinim. *Directed by:* Lucio Fulci. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A priest, Father Thomas (Jovine), hangs himself on consecrated ground in a graveyard in the town of Dunwich. At the same time in Manhattan, a psychic named Mary (MacColl) witnesses his death in a séance ... frothing at the mouth from the terrible vision and then up and dying.

A New York City reporter, Peter Bell (George) investigates Mary's death, only to find her alive in her casket. After rescuing her, she warns him of a city of the living dead, where the gates of hell are opening ... a place called Dunwich. While Bell and Mary search for Dunwich (a New England town where witches were once burned), the residents of Dunwich must deal with a catalog of inexplicable horrors. Although some folks suspect that the village idiot, Bob, is responsible for the rash of unusual deaths, a psychiatrist believes his patient Sandra is right to fear a terror supernatural in origin.

With the gates of Hell opening, a storm of maggot swirl through town, windows blow open, people vomit guts without cause and zombies teleport all around. Finally, Mary realizes that the only way to stop the plague and close the gates of Hell resides in the tomb of the priest who killed himself.

COMMENTARY: The appeal of Lucio Fulci's horror films, as a dear friend and horror movie scholar Tony Mercer once told me, is not

actually the repellent gore, but the overarching atmosphere of dread the filmmaker achieves. It's a mood, a feeling that the director creates ... an oppressive shroud of doom. It's an interesting point, and indeed —I admit to feeling dread whenever I see Fulci's name under the credits reading "Directed by..."

Perhaps snark isn't fair. Fulci is indeed adept in creating an atmosphere of doom and gloom, as he does in *Gates of Hell*. Early in the film, there are some beautiful, autumnal shots of a misty, leaf-covered cemetery. Slowly, a dead person starts to rise from the ground and indeed a texture of terror is generated with precision. Another lyrical moment finds Fulci's camera lodged inside a sealed casket as it is lowered into the earth. It is dark blue inside the tight chamber, and the air is still, stony inside the coffin. A flower petal moves unexpectedly, then the corpse opens her eyes ... *alive*.

Gates of Hell is dominated by memorable images like these, and they all contribute to the mood of terror. Bright red blood drips into a glass of creamy white milk in one scene, an image which reminded me of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, but was well done nonetheless. Late in this film, a snowstorm of maggots attack the main characters, and it's not something audiences will easily forget. A window blows open violently, and in the disgusting maggots fly. Naturally, their presence makes at least one character vomit, adding to the general unsavory quality of the moment.

Each of these horrific and atmospheric moments indeed reminds me how much I admire Fulci's visual skill. His framing is good, his composition admirable, and his long focus on weird touches creates a unique aura all his own. I can watch Fulci movies any time and enjoy them on the basis of these facts alone. Alas, they rarely make sense as coherent narratives. In fact, the details often feel downright sloppy.

For instance, in his first scene, Christopher George arrives at a crime scene (a porch stoop in Manhattan) and introduces himself as Peter Bell, a reporter. He then asks to see Sgt. Clay. A moment later—in the very same scene—he declares that he wants to see Bell. Hey, but he's Bell, he was supposed to be looking for Clay! In other words, George got the dialogue wrong, but there's no retake. Just move on.

Later, the character of Mary is believed to be dead and is quickly shuffled off to be buried. Not only is Mary alive, however, in her grave, she isn't embalmed, either. In 1980s America? Again, this is the problem with Lucio Fulci: He pays no attention to important details. A very, very unlucky person might be assessed dead at a crime scene,

but still be alive. But there's no way that a person would go through a funeral and a burial without first stopping in a mortuary for embalming. So the entire scene makes no sense. Even worse, Fulci knows this to be the case, because later the film lingers on the preparation of Emily's dead body and it includes embalming and painting lipstick on her corpse's face. So again, it feels like Fulci simply couldn't be bothered to be consistent.

This is a shame, because the scene with Mary in the grave, buried alive, is magnificent. Detecting her screams below, Bell grabs a pick axe and starts chopping open the casket. The only problem is that his axe lands mere millimeters from Mary's face, as much a danger as eventual asphyxiation. Again, this scene is brilliantly executed and it achieves exactly the desired effect ... the audience cringes with each swing of the axe.

As is the case in many Fulci films, *Gates of Hell* is gory to the max. An unfortunate girl spits up her guts, intestines pouring out of her open mouth while her eyes bleed. Later in the film, the audience sees a character named Bob get his cranium drilled. The spinning drill goes in one temple and emerges on the far side, and it appears alarmingly authentic. When Bell dies late in the film, his brain gets crushed, and then rats eat out of it ... an inauspicious end for the star of *Pieces* and *Mortuary*. It's all quite visceral, but again, the plot just doesn't make a hell of a lot of sense. Bell's investigation, for one thing, is awfully lackadaisical, given what's at stake (the opening of the gates of Hell on All Saints Day). And how precisely a priest's hanging precipitates this event is an open question too. There should be, perhaps, a town ordinance in Dunwich forbidding clergy suicide in cemeteries. And why can some zombies teleport around at will, yet not do so when confronted with a crucifix to the stomach?

The trademark Fulci atmosphere of dread is present in *Gates of Hell*, but in the service of narrative muddle and inconsistency.

Ghost Story

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"It provides no new ideas for the horror film genre, it clutters its storyline with irrelevancies, it fails to utilize a potentially fine cast and it offers nothing that is particularly stimulating in the way of special

effects.”—Frances M. Malpezzi, William M. Clements, *Magill's Cinema Annual 1982: A Survey of the 1981 Films*, Salem Press, 1982.

“As a tale of terror, this adaptation of Peter Straub’s best-seller creaks too often for its own good, although it manages some striking visual imagery under director John Irvin.”—Edwin Miller, *Seventeen*, February 1982, page 103.

“This movie might more accurately be called “The French Lieutenant’s Succubus Meets Four Friends on Frozen Pond”.... The one way director John Irvin conjures any mystery or suspense is to obfuscate the story ... Only Astaire, with his wry, adroit delivery, establishes much audience rapport.”—Michael Sragow, *Rolling Stone*, February 4, 1982, page 32.

“Alice Krige is very appealing. The rest of the movie is frustrating. You had a dream team in many respects to deliver an outstanding film, and it’s all so labored. This is one of those films that leaves you frustrated with the filmmakers because of what might have been.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Fred Astaire (Rick Hawthorne); Melvyn Douglas (Dr. John Jaffrey); John Houseman (Sears James); Douglas Fairbanks Jr. (Edwards Charles Wanderly); Craig Wasson (Don/David); Patricia Neal (Stella); Alice Krige (Alma/Eva); Jacqueline Brooks (Milly); Miguel Fernandes (Gregory Bates); Lana Holcomb (Fenny Bate); Mark Chamberlin (Young John Jeffrey); Tim Choate (Young Rickey); Kurt Johnson (Young Edward); Ken Olin (Young Sears); Robin Curtis (Rea).

CREW: Universal Studios presents a Burt Weissbourd Production of a John Irvin Film. *Visual Consultant:* Michael Seymour. *Special Visual Effects:* Albert Whitlock. *Costume Design:* May Routh. *Music:* Philippe Sarde. *Film Editor:* Tom Rolf. *Art Director:* Norman Newberry. *Director of Photography:* Jack Cardiff. *Co-Producer:* Douglas Green. *Based on the novel by:* Peter Straub. *Screenplay:* Lawrence D. Cohen. *Produced by:* Burt Weissbourd. *Casting:* Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg. *Makeup Illusions by:* Dick Smith. *Associate Producers:* Ronald Smith. *Matte Artist:* Syd Dutton. *Special Effects:* Henry Millar Jr. *Directed by:* John Irvin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 111 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Chowder Club consists of four old men who enjoy scaring each other with ghost stories. But Rick (Astaire), John (Douglas), Sears (Houseman) and Edward (Fairbanks) hide a dark

secret from their past. They know a story far more horrific than one any writer might imagine ... and it's non-fiction.

This strange old tale, mysteriously resurrected in the present, comes to the forefront when David (Wasson), son of one of the club members, dies mysteriously. The culprit is a beautiful woman (Krike) who may actually be a vengeful spirit, seeking to avenge herself upon the four young men who once loved her ... then left her to drown in icy waters to safeguard their futures. As members of the Chowder Club die one by one, it's up to Rick to bring the past back to the surface and that means exhuming a corpse trapped in a car at the bottom of an icy lake.

COMMENTARY: New England Gothic with a garnish of snow and ice is the specialty of the day in *Ghost Story*, a needlessly complicated horror that finds four old men and their "Chowder Society" imperiled by a secret and obscene crime in their past. Although *Ghost Story* looks appropriately chilling courtesy of its stunning Northeast locations, not to mention an imposing haunted house, the film is needlessly choppy and confusing. Certain characters, particularly a strange villainous squatter, seem piped in from another production and are never adequately explained.



The imperfect couple: David (Craig Wasson) and Eva (Alice Krige) face a terrible legacy in *Ghost Story* (1981).

Though topped with some ghoulish good makeup effects and prosthetics, *Ghost Story* doesn't maintain the atmosphere of dread and doom that hangs over every moment in the superior haunted house thriller, *The Changeling* (1980). Despite the welcome presence of gorgeous, ethereal Alice Krige as the film's deadly, vengeful siren, *Ghost Story* works less often than it should. It's a strangely muddled effort with loose ends and untied narratives.

Ghost Story stars several old Hollywood greats including Fred Astaire, John Houseman, Melvyn Douglas, and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., but the script provides these talented veterans precious little to do besides sit around and swap ghost stories. Astaire has the best role, since he survives the longest, and he registers most strongly. Since this material is based on a novel by Peter Straub, one can imagine the frightening ghost stories and whispers shared by the Chowder Society are quite riveting on the page. On the screen, however, telling is never so effective a tool as showing, and this movie gets bogged down in dialogue at the expense of thrills.

Ghost Story also assigns a double role to Craig Wasson, an actor who later appeared in *Body Double* (1984) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987). Frankly, he's made to look ridiculous here, since his first scene requires him to don a cheesy moustache that differentiates that character from his "twin brother," who features as the hero later. Wasson's bizarre death scene (involving a fall) is also marred by poor process work.

The movie doesn't really pick up until it reaches the film's central story, the tale told in flashback of how the four old men—as youngsters in the thirties—befriended Krige's character, whom they hoped to have sex with. Unlike the rest of the film, this portion of *Ghost Story* is involving for its sexual frankness, its romance, the authentic costumes, and the lush look of the 1930s period.

Krige's death scene is also quite memorable, and grisly. The boys have mistaken her for dead after a row with Ed, and place her body in a car. Then, they push it into the lake to make her death appear an accident, but as the vehicle descends slowly into the water, she awakens and starts moving. She pounds on the window to be freed, but not one of the men helps her, and she drowns. This is the act which brings about her supernatural wrath. The last part of the film involves her plan, though it's disappointing that simply finding her body (in the car, dredged from the lake) puts an end to her reign of terror.

Ghost Story is a film about people who made a bad decision in their youth because they were more concerned about their futures than the sanctity of human life. This immorality is punished and the cosmic scales of justice are righted, by supernatural means. That sounds like a very simple story to tell well, but somehow *Ghost Story* doesn't quite manage it. The storyteller has mumbled all the best parts of the tale.

Graduation Day

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher George (Coach Michaels); Patch MacKenzie (Ann Ramstead); E.J. Peaker (Blondie); E. Danny Murphy (Kevin); Michael Pataki (Principal Gugliani); Richard Balin (Roberts); Carmine Argenziano (Halliday); Virgil Frye (MacGregor); Beverly Dixon (Elaine Ramstead); Hal Bokar (Ronald Corliss); Linnea Quigley (Dolores); Denise Cheshire (Sally); Tom Hintnaus (Pete); Carl Rey (Ralph); Karen Abbott (Joanne); Vanna White (Doris); Ruth Ann Llorens (Laura)

CREW: *Director of Photography:* Daniel Yarussi. *Film Editor:* Martin Jay Sadoff. *Music:* Arthur Kempel. *Special Appearance by:* Felony. *Associate Producer-Assistant Director:* Hal Schartz. *Production Manager:* Herman Candle-Greggsby. *Casting:* Aaron Butler. *Special Effects Makeup:* Jill Rockow. *Written by:* Anne Marisse, Herb Freed. *Story by:* David Baughn. *Produced by:* David Baughn, Herb Freed. *Directed by:* Herb Freed. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

INCANTATION: “The world’s my toilet.”—An example of Graduation Day’s glittering repartee.

SYNOPSIS: At Midvale High School, a senior on the track team, Laura

Ramstead (Llorens), dies suddenly after winning a race. Her sister, Ann (MacKenzie), an officer in the Navy, returns home from Guam to investigate the death and visits with Laura's grief-stricken boyfriend Kevin (Murphy), who had planned to marry Laura.

Meanwhile, a killer in sweats and gloves who likes to time his vicious acts with a stopwatch, starts killing off the other members of the track team with assorted weapons, such as a fencing foil. Coach Michaels (George), who has been fired, is a suspect but someone may be attempting to frame him. As graduation day nears and the members of the track team dwindle, Ann gets closer to the surprising truth behind the brutal crimes.

COMMENTARY: “You’re only as good as your last mistake,” Michael Pataki’s character quips in Herb Freed’s follow-up to *Beyond Evil*, the 1981 low-budget slasher film, *Graduation Day*. If Freed is only as good as *Beyond Evil*, one can imagine how bad this movie is.

Graduation Day’s biggest failing is made clear in the film’s opening minutes: The editor’s cutting scissors are brandished like a lethal weapon. The sequence in question is a track meet montage, featuring young actors, and it’s an assault on athletics ... cut by someone suffering from attention deficit disorder. Worse, a horrible disco tune accompanies the athletic footage.

Not only is *Graduation Day* aggressively, nay, psychotically edited; it’s edited in a bewildering fashion ... perhaps arising from a sense of desperation. The editor apparently prefers “flash cuts” to longer ones and so during some sequences he cuts to frames that don’t appear to bear empirical connection to the moments surrounding it.

For instance, a pole vaulter in the film catapults to his doom by landing on a pit of spikes on an athletic mat. Before he can do so, however, the editor cuts away (briefly) to a cabinet at school with awards in it. Huh?

When the viewer isn’t bring abused by *Graduation Day*’s “stylistic” cutting, director Herb Freed permits his narrative to lapse into self-indulgence. Portraying the nasty school principal, Michael Pataki engages in a comedy interlude in his office that it is neither comedic nor, technically, an interlude. It goes on and on endlessly, replete with unfunny shtick ... a real dead end.

And then there’s the film’s real downfall; the seemingly interminable “Gangster Rock” portion of the film. For those who aren’t familiar

with this atrocity, the “Gangster Rock” is an irritating rock song performed in the film by Jeff Spry, Joe Spry, and Doug Burlison. “The Gangster Rock! The Gangster Roooooock!” the lyrics drone endlessly, during a live performance at a school dance. Totally dissipating the film’s meager sense of suspense, the song continues to play over a chase-stalk scene in the park. The result is a “horror” scene that should have been scary, but isn’t.

Historically, *Graduation Day* may prove significant primarily for its lackluster amendments to the slasher paradigm. Although there’s all the material you would expect here—the red herring (Christopher George’s character), the vice before the slice-and-dice (weed and breasts), the killer in an identifiable uniform of sorts (a track outfit and using a stopwatch)—the film finally falls apart because there’s no protagonist to identify with. The seemingly sedated final girl, Anne Ramstead (played by Patch MacKenzie), is supposed to be tough and capable because she’s in the military but she’s rather dull. Worse, she’s technically absent in her own story for long stretches. There’s a significant spell in *Graduation Day* in which our heroine simply—*poof*—disappears.

The climax also fails to elevate *Graduation Day* above mediocrity, and that’s a generous assessment. At the conclusion of the film, the killer is revealed as Laura’s boyfriend, Kevin. He had planned to marry her on graduation day, of course, but her untimely death prevented that ... and now he’s taking revenge on everyone he deems responsible (the coach, fellow athletes). Well, wouldn’t you guess—Laura’s corpse ends up playing a vital, nonsensical, and un-motivated role in the film’s finale, one that arises from nothing that occurs in the previous hour-and-a-half. Is this supposed to be a supernatural slasher flick, or just a really, *really* bad movie? Movies like *Maniac* or even *Don’t Go in the House* might get away with this, because the lead character is insane, and therefore we are privy to his/her insane world.

With its ridiculous, virtually disconnected climax, *Graduation Day* matriculates only to absurdity. That established, when I really want to irritate my wife now, I just sing a few bars of “The Gangster Rock.”

Halloween II

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“It’s the ultimate in arm-twisting, edge-of-the-seat suspense with murders arriving in ones, twos and threes, all of them horribly anticipated in dark corridors and menacing music.”—Archer Winsten, *The New York Post*, October 30, 1981.

“Terrific terror has two requirements: acceleration and humor ... *Halloween II* has none ... *Halloween II* starts and stays at a fever pitch. Without relief or variety, this pitch is as numbing as the metronomic regularity with which crabby Michael dispatches his victims.”—Joann Rhetts, *The Charlotte Observer*, October 31, 1981.

“*Halloween II* is a retread of *Halloween* without that movie’s craft, exquisite timing, and thorough understanding of horror.”—Roger Ebert, *Roger Ebert’s Home Movie Companion*, Andrews and McMeel, 1993, page 274.

“What if you’re a director with a hit movie, they’re making a sequel, you don’t really want sequels, so you decide to destroy your own franchise to stop it? It almost seems like that’s what Carpenter (and Debra Hill as his accomplice) tried to accomplish. This movie has a couple of saving graces—it’s got the real mask, it’s got Jamie Lee (with an awful wig—combine that with the Shatner mask and you’ve got to wonder if there isn’t a *Star Trek* subtext here that we haven’t figured out), and Carpenter and Alan Howarth did some interesting music. It’s also got Donald Pleasence. But it really kills Michael Myers as a force of nature—now, he’s a disgruntled sibling. Huh? That one revelation managed to piss back on the original (which is something of an accomplishment that few sequels manage to do). Gratuitous violence. But even worse—you get Jamie Lee Curtis, why do you keep her asleep for half the film? Why introduce the other characters that we don’t care about? And why did they make the same mistakes in *Halloween V*?

“This is a frustrating film. There were rumors that this sequel would follow Jamie Lee Curtis into her adulthood, away from Haddonfield, in an apartment complex. That could have been interesting. *Halloween H2O* is a much better sequel than *Halloween II* (and if you’re really interested, *Halloween IV* is better too). The Shape’s first killing in the film happens because ... why? What was the victim’s association with anything? Instead of calling him The Shape in this film, it should have been The Shame. I admire John Carpenter immensely, but this movie was an insult to his amazing original film.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“The only thing I don’t like about this movie is it helped start the

sequel frenzy in horror franchises, which have led to a weakening of the genre. I like Michael Myers for the same reason I dig zombies, though. He is cold, patient, implacable, and persistent. And he cuts a mean fillet.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jamie Lee Curtis (Laurie Strode); Donald Pleasence (Sam Loomis); Charles Cyphers (Sheriff Leigh Brackett); Jeffrey Baker (Graham); Lance Guest (Jimmy); Pamela Susan Shoop (Karen); Hunter Von Leer (Gary Hunt); Dick Warlock (The Shape); Leo Rossi (Bud); Gloria Gifford (Mrs. Alves); Tawny Moyers (Jill); Ana Alicia (Janet); Ford Rainey (Dr. Mixter); Cliff Emmicch (Mr. Garrett); Nancy Stephens (Marion); John Zenda (Marshal); Catherine Bergstrom (Producer); Ty Mitchell (Young Gary); Dana Carvey (Assistant); Adam Gunn (Young Michael Myers); Nancy Loomis (Annie).

CREW: Moustapha Akkad presents a Dino De Laurentiis Corporation film, A John Carpenter/Debra Hill Production. *Casting:* Mary Gail Artz. *Film Editors:* Mark Goldblatt, Skip Schoolnik. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Nancy Platt Jacoby. *Music:* John Carpenter. *In Association with:* Alan Howarth. *Associate Producer:* Barry Bernardi. *Production Designer:* Michael Riva. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Executive Producers:* Irwin Yablans, Joseph Wolf. *Written and Produced by:* John Carpenter, Debra Hill. *Directed by:* Rick Rosenthal. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On October 31, 1978, escaped mental patient Michael Myers continues his Halloween killing spree while his near-victim Laurie Strode (Curtis) is rushed to Haddonfield Memorial Hospital by paramedics Bud (Rossi) and Jimmy (Guest). Myers' former psychiatrist, the determined Dr. Sam Loomis (Pleasence), attempts to determine if Myers is still alive after a fiery accident involving a trick-or-treater wearing the same costume. Michael finds his way to the hospital and begins killing off the nurses and paramedics in his quest to kill Laurie.

Meanwhile, a doped-up Laurie begins to experience flashbacks from her youth ... particularly an occasion in the past wherein she learned that she was adopted. Laurie then realizes that Michael Myers is her brother, and that he has returned to Haddonfield to kill her like he killed his older sibling in 1963. Dr. Loomis also learns of the connection and rushes to the hospital, but Myers is virtually unstoppable. Finally, Loomis and Laurie are pinned down in an operating theater, with Michael Myers hot on their path. In a supreme

act of self-sacrifice Loomis attempts to blow up Michael by activating a lighter in a room filled with gas.

COMMENTARY: *Halloween* is a brilliant, almost perfect film of uncommon precision and terrifying horror. It's one of the few titles that actually merits comparison to Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and is on a par with that classic in terms of how simple and elegantly it generates fear.

Halloween II, Rick Rosenthal's 1981 follow-up to the John Carpenter classic, is a good film, but perhaps a Toyota Corolla of slasher films, not a Rolls-Royce. It's efficient in getting the job done, and the horror fan will get good mileage out of the picture, but it's ultimately not playing on the same level as the masterpiece that precipitated it. That said, it is vastly superior to many of the slasher films, and is a welcome continuation of the Michael Myers saga.

Halloween II opens with a splendidly conceived and cleverly accomplished crane shot in which the camera follows the branch line of a tree to reveal the Doyle house, the location where the tense final moments of *Halloween* took place. The last five minutes of *Halloween* are then replayed to refresh a viewer's memory, since this film was released before the age of video rentals, and there are some interesting alterations.

First off, the angle which reveals Michael's young, normal-appearing face once Laurie has ripped his mask off has been excised. Secondly, a new exterior depicting the flare of gunpowder against the darkness of the house as Dr. Loomis empties his revolver has been inserted. Thirdly, the angle of Michael plummeting off the high ledge is also altered, and he now seems to be standing atop the railing rather than behind it before the plunge.

Another slight revisionist touch finds Loomis no longer realizing that Michael Myers' prone form has gone missing until he runs down the stairs and rushes outside to the yard.

This five-minute recap exemplifies perfectly both the success and failure of *Halloween II*. The brilliant photography by Dean Cundey and a script by Hill and Carpenter grant the film the right feel, yet somehow, the specific details are skewed a degree or two. Things are just a hair off, and it's mildly disconcerting.

On the positive side, it seems that great care has been taken to extend the aura of the original picture. *Halloween II* opens with a title

sequence of the same tape as the original, with a jack-o'-lantern looming larger and larger on the left side of the frame.



Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) and Dr. Sam Loomis (Donald Pleasence) prepare for a last stand against Michael Myers—the Shape—during the climax of *Halloween II* (1981).

As the camera draws nearer to it, the pumpkin splits asunder to reveal a grinning, human skull. This is a different and highly original touch, but an acceptable one as it successfully extends the original's atmosphere while also letting fans know that something new has been added to the recipe.

In a wonderful bit of cross-film continuity, Annie's corpse—played by Nancy Loomis—shows up for one short sequence. Again, this kind of attention to detail indicates a production team caring enough to make a movie that could really be happening on the same night, even though it was shot two years later, or more. It would have been very easy to keep Annie's corpse under a sheet or not spotlight it at all, but Loomis was apparently a good sport and returned for this cameo.

Notice as well that the horror movie film festival motif begun in *Halloween* (with films such as *The Thing* and *Forbidden Planet*) continued in this sequel, with *Night of the Living Dead* now playing on

Dr. Demento. The choice of the film also boasts some artistic resonance. George A. Romero's classic is not merely an onscreen reference or homage to a good film, but serves as a thematic parallel to the film's action. As the movie about the undead shambling about unspools on screen, in the alleys of Haddonfield (and in the corridors of the hospital) it really is "the night of the living dead" as Michael—a man shot six times—lurches about. Drawing further attention to the fact that Michael is now one of the living dead himself, he is seen in black-and-white—just like those old ghouls—on hospital monitors, forging a symbolic visual connection to the Romero classic.

In fact, *Halloween II* also nicely evokes *Night of the Living Dead* in the way it uses some of its characters. Jamie Lee Curtis spends much of the sequel catatonic and in a state of shock, not unlike Barbara (Judith O'Dea) in *Night*. This may not seem significant, but it proves that *Halloween II* at least has something other than gory murders on its mind.

Halloween II does not short the audience when it comes to generating terror. The final chase is exciting and intense, thanks to a combination of effective scoring and good direction. The suspense goes into overdrive during the climax as Laurie is caught behind elevator doors that close too slowly and Myers approaches methodically, crunching broken glass on the floor as he looms ever closer.

Rewardingly, Rick Rosenthal has also done a fine job keeping Michael Myers at the fringe of perception (and the frame) again and again. His ghoulish shadow is seen behind curtains, and his mask is eerily illuminated by the light of a fish tank. When Michael isn't fading into view like this, he's leaping into the frame, and *Halloween II* boast some decent jolts. The sequence wherein a kid with a boom box unexpectedly smacks into Myers on a street corner is guaranteed to make one throw the popcorn. As the two pedestrians clash, the famous *Halloween* score kicks into high gear, and this movie feels as electric as the original.

Halloween II is good instead of great because of problems with believability in the script. Believability is crucially important even in the slasher paradigm (unless it's a *Friday the 13th* movie) and *Halloween II* makes some strange errors in this regard. For instance, Haddonfield Hospital appears to have been constructed with an amazing new technological development called a "smart" door, an entrance that only allows the right characters through it at the right time.

Early in the film, the script establishes that the door is locked and that the security man, Mr. Garrett, must buzz people through if they hope to gain entrance to the facility. Despite this fact, Michael gets into the facility without being buzzed in, and when he's inside, nobody notices him on the security monitors! Then, Michael gets out again without being buzzed out, and kills Mr. Garrett. Then he returns again without being buzzed in.

One cannot make the argument that Mr. Garrett left the door unlocked when he left to explore the storage because at *Halloween II*'s climax, Laurie runs to the door ... and it won't open! The devil is in the details, and Michael has a secret co-conspirator in a door that allows him egress but limits other cast members.

Another issue of believability involves the hospital. In *Halloween II*, the hallways are dark, the wards are virtually abandoned, and there seems to be no significant second or third shift on duty. Even a small hospital supports a slew of technicians in the blood bank, the emergency room, the laboratory, specimen processing, histology, client services and so on. Where are these behind-the-scenes staff? Where are the doctors? Where are all the other patients? Weirdly, this all-but-abandoned hospital is revealed to have a ward filled with infants, but their mothers are nowhere in sight! Logically, they should still be in the hospital recovering from giving birth. And it certainly strains credibility that there would be no patients in the emergency room on Halloween night. Although one kid is shown to have a razor blade stuck in his mouth, there would surely be other accidents to contend with.

As for Michael Myers, he's really changed in this film. In the original, he watched and planned his attacks extensively. In the sequel, he gallivants into a random house and kills a character named Alice, a woman whom he has not seen before this moment. He does it on a whim. In addition, Michael has become unbelievably complex in his killing methods in the sequel. For instance, in the most ludicrous example, he kills Nurse Alves (Gloria Gifford) by attaching a tube to her veins and draining all her blood. This is made stranger by the fact that when Jimmy finds poor Nurse Alves, she's not only leaking blood out of her arm, but the tube is sealed to her upper arm with perfectly applied bandages. So serial killer Myers not only performed an elaborate operation on her to pinpoint her veins and drain them, he bandaged up the wound as well. How thoughtful.

Perhaps all of this could be described as nitpicking, but the one thing that makes *Halloween II* a good rather great effort involves a very

troubling change in premise. In the original film, Michael was an escaped killer with no discernible motive to kill. He ended up going after Laurie because she caught his eye, but otherwise he had no relation to her.

Motivation was opaque and irrelevant, and the fear generated was of a universal nature. Michael could come for anybody. Straining to make a sequel and provide further background information about Myers, *Halloween II* makes Laurie Michael's younger sister. He's killing all his relatives, you see, just like when he murdered his older sister in 1963.

The power of Michael Myers, at least in *Halloween*, is that he's "The Shape." The white mask has no features, and so as audience members, we imprint our own fear upon that blank slate. Michael is a force of nature, a boogeyman who exists despite law and order, modernity, technology and science. He can't be diagnosed, can't be understood ... can't be stopped. *Halloween II* undercuts this very potent terror by providing Michael an easily understood motivation: he wants to kill his family.

Truthfully, any other motivation would have been just as bad. This is like a shark wanting revenge in the fourth *Jaws* movie. Neither a shark nor Michael Myers need be limited by human beliefs and human relationships. They are fearsome simply because of what they represent: nature, the unknown ... a shape in the dark.

CLOSE-UP: Paging Nurse Alves: "It was an unusual thing," actress Gloria Gifford recalls of her involvement in *Halloween II*, and the manner in which she earned the role of Nurse Alves. "What happened was, we were all in an acting class at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, and the director [Rick Rosenthal] had just taken his degree at AFI. *Halloween II* was going to be his first movie, and he decided to use actors from the class. So he recommended me.

"The role was written in the script as a 55-year-old Caucasian woman," Gifford remembers "and I was clearly neither fifty-five nor Caucasian. He suggested to Debra Hill that she read me, and they read me and said, 'Okay, you look so young, I don't know if you can play the head of these people, but you have the authority.' I've always been the authority figure.

"When I went into makeup for the first time, they said, 'What role are you playing?' And I said, 'Mrs. Alves.' And they said, 'No, no, it's a fifty-five-year-old white woman.' And I said, 'Not any more, it's me.' That was a shock to them, but it never seemed to hurt the movie. I

was very lucky because Rick Rosenthal had a short-cut in talking to me, Leo Rossi, Ana Alicia and a few other people he picked from class. His wife Nancy Stephens also played a role, and she was also in class. It was very lucky, because we all worked fast, and he didn't feel—as a first-time director—that he was getting stopped by actors questioning him. Because we didn't question him. We were grateful.”

Gifford also notes that she and the other cast members conducted extensive research for their roles in the film. “Rick made us go to the hospitals and learn how to do medical procedures as nurses and doctors, and there was even a real doctor on the set, and they had to use him when they came in for real close-ups.”

In fact, recalling this on-set doctor, Gifford also remembers a gruesome story about him. “They used his hand to inject the needle in close-up, and then after this movie he had an accident and lost one of his fingers, which to me is an amazing thing, because they had made a big deal of using his hand and only his hand for those shots. It was a good thing his hands were immortalized [on film], because he never had those hands again. No one's ever talked about that, and to me that was an amazing thing...”

Gifford also remembers shooting in the closed-down L.A. hospital somewhere in L.A. and the spooky atmosphere of the place. One memory she wishes she could forget involves the scene wherein Lance Guest discovers Mrs. Alves' corpse.

“I'm the only one who dies off-screen, I think. They put all this white makeup on me like the blood was drained out of me, and they put me on a table and filled the room with the blood, so the Lance character could come in and slip and fall. They set me up on the table, filled the room with so much blood—much more than any normal human being would—and then they were like, ‘Okay, Gloria,’ and then they went to lunch. I said, ‘What are you doing?’ and they said, ‘You can't move, because you can't disturb anything.’ And I said, ‘Excuse me?’ And they left me there, you know, because they didn't want to disturb the blood on the floor that they had put there perfectly. So I laid there.

“And then—of course—we had Lance coming in and slipping, and then changing his clothes and slipping, and changing his clothes and slipping, while I pretended to be dead. Which is a memory for me, playing that scene. I always remember that. It was gory. Just the idea that someone would come in and slip in all that blood...”

The Hand

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[A]n eerie mix of abnormal psychology and the supernatural, hinges on a beautifully turned, stylish performance by Michael Caine ... Gruesome and definitely unnerving.”—Edwin Miller, *Seventeen*, July 1981, page 90.

“...efficient but forgettable chiller ... the umpteenth retelling of a very old story ... Thank heavens Caine is around; few actors can disintegrate before our eyes with such chilling aplomb.”—Stephen Schiff, *Glamour*, “Almost a Grabber,” July 1981, page 28.

“... *The Hand* is admirably performed—Michael Caine interprets the role of the grief-crazed artist with bold originality, and Anne McEnroe is splendidly tantalizing as a kinky student ... and this model nightmare achieves its goal of grisly fun with a vivacity that is downright venomous.”—Guy Flatley, “A Show of Hand,” *Cosmopolitan*, June 1981, page 16.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Caine (Jonathan Lansdale); Andrea Marcovicci (Anne Lansdale); Annie McEnroe (Stella Roche); Bruce McGill (Brian Ferguson); Viveca Lindfors (Doctress); Rosemary Murphy (Karen Wagner); Mara Hobel (Lizzie Lansdale); Richard Fleischer (David Maddow); Pat Corley (Sheriff); Ed Marshall (Doctor); Richard Altman (Hammond); John Stinson (Therapist); Sparky Watt (Sgt); Tracey Walter (Cop); Oliver Stone (Bum).

CREW: An Edward R. Pressman Production. *Casting:* Barbara Clawan/BCI. *Music:* James Horner. *Film Editor:* Richard Marks. *Production Designer:* John Michael Riva. *Director of Photography:* King Baggot. *Executive Producer:* Clark L. Paylow. *Based upon the book* The Lizard’s Tail by: Marc Brandel. *Produced by:* Edward R. Pressman. *Special Visual Effects by:* Carlo Rambaldi. *Medical and Psychiatric Consultant:* Dr. Stuart Lerner. *Stunt Coordinator:* Buddy Joe Hooker. *Thanks to Special Makeup Consultants:* Stan Winston, Tom Burman. *Written and Directed by:* Oliver Stone. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You’ll have phantom feelings for years ... you’ll never quite get over that feeling.”—A doctor’s prognosis for Jonathan Lansdale after he loses his hand in a freak car accident in Oliver Stone’s *The Hand*.

SYNOPSIS: Jonathan Lansdale (Caine), writer and artist of the popular comic strip “Mandro,” loses his drawing hand in a freak car accident while arguing with his wife, Anne (Marcovicci). He tries to carry on but the publisher of his comic wants to replace him with David Maddow (Fleischer), an up-and-coming artist with new ideas.

Lansdale gives up the comic and moves to California to teach at a small college even while Anne and their daughter Lizzie (Hobel) remain in New York. Now living in a small cabin, Jonathan begins to experience strange incidents in which he is shadowed by his “phantom” severed hand. Worse, he begins to imagine the hand committing murder, offing his enemies and those who betray him.

At Christmas, he learns that his girlfriend Stella (McEnroe) may be cheating on him with another professor (McGill) and the hand takes its revenge. Finally, when Anne and Lizzie come out to visit, Jonathan is uncertain if the deadly hand—carrying out his subconscious desires—will strike once more.

COMMENTARY: Oliver Stone contributes his second horror film to the genre, and like his 1976 effort *Seizure*, *The Hand* focuses on an artist, a creator. In both cases, this creator increasingly shapes his world and is haunted by some element of his own personality. In *Seizure*, Jonathan Frid’s fictional characters came to life to terrorize his family, and in *The Hand*, Michael Caine’s severed hand performs the cartoonist’s subconscious bidding, murdering those he bears hostility towards.

The idea of an evil, severed hand acting on its own accord is not a new one to the genre. Early versions of *The Hands of Orlac* treaded the same territory, as did such TV episodes as *Night Gallery*’s (1970–73) “The Hand of Borgus Weems” and *Quinn Martin’s Tales of the Unexpected* (1977) “A Hand for Sonny Blue.” Stone’s take on the material, his *modus operandi*, involves a dose of psychology. To wit, the audience is never certain (not even in the film’s insane finale, which could be a dream or a hallucination) if the hand is actually acting of its own accord with a separate intelligence, or Michael Caine’s character is merely insane and killing people on his own. In this regard, *The Hand* resembles the 1978 film *Magic*, starring Anthony Hopkins.

The argument for a psychological malfunction rather than a self-aware severed hand is strong, and placed early in the film. Before the accident, artist Lansdale is depicted chopping wood with an axe, and he looks over at his young daughter to see her playing with the

severed tail of a lizard. The tail still reveals reflex actions, moving and apparently thinking of its own volition. When he loses his hand later, perhaps Lansdale's mind snaps, and he flashes back on this moment, his complaining brain providing a scapegoat and culprit for the anger he feels.

Similarly, just before the accident occurs in the car (in a graphic and very disturbing scene involving blood fountaining out of the vehicle), Lansdale is locked in an argument with his wife. Emblazoned in his memory in that moment of loss (and oddly, birth) is his hatred for her, the woman who wants to "re-evaluate" their union. He hates her for this, and also blames her for the accident, no doubt. The evil hand is the child of their discontent and failed marriage.

At another juncture, another "real" moment informs Lansdale's understanding of the hand, his evil alter ego. When his agent pressures him about his wife leaving him, he looks down at a lobster on the table and its legs retract like a fist closing. Later, the hand repeats this motion—moving for the first time in the film—when he learns he is being replaced on the job.

The Hand could be read in the opposite fashion as well, because the hand is clearly depicted moving around on its own, crawling about on the floor. However, in at least one instance, the crawling hand is moving about in Lansdale's dreams, his nightmare, so even this tends to reinforce the idea of a psychological thriller in which an angry man has projected his anger and hatred on a separate entity and identity, his severed limb.

Also, it's difficult to deny that Caine gets increasingly creepy and deranged as the movie progresses. He angers more easily, and a nice girl, Stella, falls into his world of hate and bitterness. He grows jealous and eventually has her talk to the hand too, to use a colloquialism.

The final scenes are just as ambiguous. "It's your hate. It's your will," Lansdale's psychologist tells him, in regards to the offending hand. "Take responsibility for it."

However, the very end of the movie features the hand attacking the therapist, killing her. This is either an acknowledgment that the hand is real and a supernatural entity operating on Lansdale's impulses, like the severed lizard's tale, or a representation that Lansdale wants to kill her, silence her. He imagines her dying at the hand's ... hand, just as he imagined the hand crawling in his nightmares, crawling up his leg, and so forth.

Whichever way one elects to interpret *The Hand*, it's a seedy, disturbing movie, highlighted by a cruel, caustic performance from Caine. The movie was the recipient of some terrible reviews (as was *Magic*, actually), perhaps because it draws the viewer into the ugly world view of a misanthropic, bitter character; perhaps because *The Hand* doggedly remains ambiguous about its subject matter and the exact nature of its titular character. No easy answers are proffered, and that's always a bonus in the horror genre. This is a scary movie that wants the audience to *think*, not simply jump.

Let's give it a hand...

Happy Birthday to Me

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"*Happy Birthday to Me* is an odd film in the slasher genre. It's *odd* in the fact that it looks good, and is fairly well scripted. It even boasts some acting that is above par. Melissa Sue Anderson, in particular, competently delivers some really powerful scenes in and amongst the blood and savagery. The photography is inventive and the special effects are handled capably. However, these very positive characteristics seemingly aid in helping to capsize the film, as they leave viewers expecting so much more. While the movie crawls along, the messy narrative simply twists and turns itself inside out, and eventually becomes uninspired and tiresome. In the end, there is very little plausible in the conclusion, and at 110 minutes, it's just too long."—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Melissa Sue Anderson (Virginia Wainright); Glenn Ford (Dr. David Farady); Lawrence Dane (Hal Wainright); Sharon Acker (Estelle); Frances Hyland (Mrs. Patterson); Tracy Bregman (Ann); Jack Blum (Alfred); Matt Craven (Steve); Lenore Zann (Maggie); David Eisner (Rudi); Michel Rene Labelle (Etienne); Richard Rebiere (Greg); Lesleh Donaldson (Bernadette); Lisa Langlois (Amelia); Earl Pennington (Lt. Tracy); Murray Westgate (Gateskeeper); Jerome Tiberghien (Professor Heregard); Maurice Podbrey (Dr. Feinblom); Vlasta Brana (Bartender); Griffith Brewer (Verger); Walter Massey (Conventioneer Leader); Terry Haid (Feinblom's Assistant); Karen Stephen (Ms. Calhoun).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents a John Dunning and Andre Link Production of a J. Lee Thompson Film. *Film Editor:* Debra Karen. *Production Designer:* Earl Preston. *Music:* Bo Harwood, Lance Rubin. *Director of Photography:* Miklos Lente. *Screenplay:* John Saxton, Peter Jobin, Timothy Bond. *Story by:* John Saxton. *Associate Producer:* Lawrence Nesis. *Casting:* Casablanca Productions. *Costume Design:* Hugette Gagne. *Special Effects Makeup:* The Burman Studios. *Stunt Coordinator:* Max Kleven. *Line Producer:* Stewart Harding. *Produced by:* John Dunning, Andre Link. “*Happy Birthday to Me*” *Music by:* Lance Rubin. *Lyrics by:* Molly-Ann Leikin. *Directed by:* J. Lee Thompson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At prestigious Crawford Academy, the student body’s self-proclaimed “top ten” are disappearing at an alarming rate. Particularly concerned about this is Virginia Wainright (Anderson), who is having problems with her memory and who fears she has committed murder.

Virginia’s troubles stem from a car accident years earlier—on her birthday—in which she and her mother plunged off an opening drawbridge and into the water far below. She sustained injuries and had to undergo experimental brain surgery. Now she fears she is, for some reason, killing her friends, a fear that her psychotherapist David (Ford) tries to assure her is unfounded.

But on the Sunday of Virginia’s birthday, her friends continue to vanish. The mystery is explained in an isolated cottage where Virginia and her mother once celebrated another tragic birthday.

COMMENTARY: This holiday-themed slasher film stars Melissa Sue Anderson as a psychologically uncertain final girl who, shades of *Night School*, may also be a deranged killer.

Glenn Ford, star of *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), plays Virginia’s concerned psychologist, named David. Ford, like Donald Pleasence in *Halloween* or Ben Johnson in *Terror Train*, gives the film a veneer of respectability, making audiences aware that this enterprise wasn’t filmed with a Super 8 camera in somebody’s basement. That observation is important, because *Happy Birthday to Me* is a more-polished slasher film than most, with a high-budget glean and technical skill—and even its share of death-defying stunts, including a car jump over a split drawbridge after a game of “chicken.”

Virginia’s mother died in 1975 in a car accident on that very drawbridge. Virginia was in the car too and, in a powerful scene, we

see her smash her skull escaping the sinking vehicle. Afterwards, Virginia required brain surgery (which is depicted in flashbacks). Now, the audience wonders: Is Virginia twisted by this traumatic experience and surgery, and thus murderous? Or is someone else having her on, trying to drive her mad out of some deep-seated desire for revenge?



Virginia (Melissa Sue Anderson) confronts her father (Lawrence Dane) during the “birthday party” climax of *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981).

The terrible event on the drawbridge occurred on Virginia's birthday, and so it is the concept of the birthday that serves as the film's organizing principle. It's not just in the title, but the tragedy occurred on Ginny's birthday. Indeed her mother went out on the bridge that very night in anger because no one had come to Ginny's party ... but had gone ... elsewhere. That act (failing to attend the party) was the transgression that needs punishing.

The victim base in *Happy Birthday to Me* is also related to the birthday leitmotif: They're all no-shows at that long-ago party. And finally, the requisite tour of the dead is a recreation of the birthday party that Ginny missed back in the day. During the film's bizarre, creepy climax, all the dead victims are seated in chairs around a table,

appropriately “dressed” for the occasion, and the killer sings “Happy Birthday to Me” while bringing in the birthday cake.

To reach this stunning conclusion, *Happy Birthday to Me* must undergo some outrageous contortions and cross a few hurdles of plausibility. For things to proceed as they are dramatized in the film, one must accept, for example, that the technology exists to provide a completely convincing “makeup” double of Virginia. One that could fool her friends and relatives at close range. It’s the *Mission: Impossible* syndrome.

Why is such makeup necessary? Well ... okay, stop reading here if you haven’t seen the film...

Ginny’s *not* the killer. She’s just set up as one. All those years ago, Virginia’s dad was married to someone else and had another daughter, Ann Thomerson. Ginny’s mom was just the mistress, the “other woman,” and that’s why nobody attended Ginny’s party ... it wouldn’t have been right to be seen at the home of a child born out of an affair.

But the trick is that Ann Thomerson—Ginny’s half-sister—saw her own family suffer too, and her mother’s marriage eventually broke up. Now, her revenge is to make her rival, Ginny, look like the killer (hence the makeup disguise) by killing all those who didn’t attend Ginny’s party. Got that? If not, just realize that this was also the ending of *Scream* in 1996. There, Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich) was committing murder because Sidney’s (Neve Campbell) mother had broken up his family.

Despite the issues of believability and a perhaps overly complex plot, *Happy Birthday to Me* is a fine slasher film. Director J. Lee Thompson, a veteran in the industry, uses deep focus and unique compositions to keep viewers off balance. The film’s heroine is both a red herring and a final girl (an interesting twist), and although the film’s dialogue is only adequate, the death scenes are pretty ably staged, including the one that occurs in a weight room, where Greg is exercising. The killer (uniformed in black gloves and a black jogging suit) drops weights on his crotch, and a wounded Greg drops the other bar bell on his neck. Ouch.

The Howling
★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“[A] tense, often frightening picture with marvelous special effects by Rob Bottin that support rather than overwhelm a neatly horrific story.”—Bruce Lanier Wright, *Nightwalkers: Gothic Horror Movies: The Modern Era*, Taylor Publishing Company, page 158.

“[A] handsome self-consciously witty movie ... the special effects by a twenty-one-year-old wiz kid named Rob Bottin, are the movie’s main attraction, and they’re wonderful ... Unfortunately, the action stops whenever Bottin trots out his effects, and this tactic ruins the suspense.”—Stephen Schiff, *Glamour*: “Do Werewolves have more fun?” June 1981, page 136.

“*The Howling* doesn’t take itself seriously ... it’s consciously trashy. At most horror movies, audiences laugh at some of the conventions ... In *The Howling*, [the filmmakers] give the conventions a nudge over into self-parody and set up the laughs. The picture isn’t afraid of being silly—which is its chief charm.”—Pauline Kael, “Safes and Snouts,” *The New Yorker*, May 4, 1981, page 164.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dee Wallace (Karen White); Patrick Macnee (Dr. George Waggoner); Dennis Dugan (Christopher); Christopher Stone (Bill Neill); Belinda Balaski (Terry Fisher); Kevin McCarthy (Fred Francis); John Carradine (Erle Kenton); Slim Pickens (Sheriff Sam Neufeld); Elisabeth Brooks (Marsha); Robert Picardo (Eddie); Margie Impert (Donna); Noble Willingham (Charles Barton); James Murtaugh (Jerry Warren); Jim McKrell (Lew Landers); Kenneth Tobey (Older Cop); Don McLeod (T.C.); Dick Miller (Walter Paisley); Steve Nevil (Young Cop); Mesach Taylor (Shantz).

CREW: An Avco Embassy Pictures, International Film Investors and Wescom Productions Presentation of a Daniel Blatt Production. *Director of Photography:* John Hora. *Film Editors:* Mark Goldblatt, Joe Dante. *Music:* Pino Donaggio. *Conducted by:* Natale Massara. *Executive Producers:* Daniel H. Blatt, Steven A. Lane. *Based on the novel by:* Gary Brandner. *Screenplay by:* John Sayles, Terence H. Winkless. *Produced by:* Michael Finnell, Jack Conrad. *Associate Producer:* Rob Bottin. *Casting:* Susan Arnold, Judith Weiner. *Costume Design:* Jack Buehler. *Special Effects:* Roger George. *Special Makeup Effects:* Rob Bottin. *Special Makeup Effects Consultant:* Rick Baker. *Special Mechanical Effects:* Douglas Beswick. *Directed by:* Joe Danks. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Another five years of hard work, and maybe I’ll be a

human being.”—Colony patient Donna’s (Impert) comment to reporter Karen White (Dee Wallace), who is unaware that she is speaking quite literally. From *The Howling*.

P.O.V.

“I saw *The Howling* again recently and it holds up really well. It was a low-budget movie, it was shot very quickly, and that kind of makeup had never been done before. Rick Baker was doing the same thing on *American Werewolf in London*, and I don’t think I was completely aware of this at the time, but I think they [the producers] were to rush the movie out to beat it. [The movie] has Joe’s vision. It’s got that integrity. And it’s got a lot of humor in it.”—Kent Beyda, assistant editor on *The Howling*.

SYNOPSIS: TV news anchor Karen White (Wallace) descends into an urban red light district to help catch Eddie the Mangler (Picardo), a deadly criminal responsible for a string of violent murders. She meets him in a porno theater where he threatens her in the dark, but the police arrive at the last minute and shoot him. To help shell-shocked amnesiac Karen remember what happened in that theater, psychiatrist Dr. George Waggoner (Macnee) recommends that she and her husband Bill (Stone) visit the idyllic patients’ community known as “The Colony.”

Karen’s associates at the news station Christopher and Terry (Dugan and Balaski) investigate Eddie in the city, learning all about strange werewolf lore, while Bill and Karen convalesce at the Colony ... unaware that the Colony is actually a haven for lycanthropes. The nymphomaniac Marcia (Brooks) seduces Bill and turns him into a werewolf, leaving Karen to fend for herself as the wolves—and Eddie—return to make her a new member of their close-knit pack.

COMMENTARY: Joe Dante’s *The Howling* is fun and a little bit nasty, both snarkier and sillier than John Landis’s *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). *The Howling* is more like a low-budget exploitation flick, though its stunning transformation sequences (courtesy of Rob Bottin) are every bit the equal of its brother in the werewolf pack. Whereas *An American Werewolf in London* concerned itself almost exclusively with re-imagining the wolf man tale with modern trappings, taking every twist and turn in the mythos to its logical conclusion (which is often quite a funny enterprise), *The Howling* is more scattershot. It’s playful and gleeful and functions well as both satire and horror.

Everything about *The Howling* suggests that Dante was out to have a good time. He's cast his favorite actors here, including Dick Miller, John Carradine and Robert Picardo, and takes inordinate and unabashed glee out of staging bizarre scene transitions. Early in the film for instance, one character notes optimistically the hope that "these people aren't too weird" out at the colony, and Dante cuts immediately to a close-up of grizzled old Carradine howling at the moon.

More dramatically, and making a jab at television is the transition that occurs following Karen's death at film's end. The anchorwoman has just transformed into a werewolf on a live TV news broadcast. Consequently, she is fatally shot on camera (at her own request). However, the frantic control room operators at the studio desperately cut away to a commercial so as not to offend viewers. That commercial depicts beefy dog food. In other words, Karen is *dead meat*. The next scene, of Marcia ordering a "rare" hamburger, reinforces this grim joke.

Following this scene bridge, the denizens of a bar are heard debating whether what they saw on the news was real, and it's generally decided that filmmakers can make anything look authentic with the special effects these days. This assessment simultaneously negates Karen's final sacrifice, which was intended as a warning about the werewolves to the general populace, and comments on the rush to produce werewolf films exploiting new and more realistic special effects, like those imagined by Bottin and Baker.

The Howling also pokes fun at popular psychology. This is a movie that raises the idea of instinct versus intellect, and consequently there's a war of philosophy raging amongst the werewolf colony. One faction sees humans as their "cattle" while the other faction (led by Patrick Macnee) wishes to co-exist peaceably with men. "Times have changed and we haven't," he complains.

"You can't tame what's meant to be wild," another suggests, and this thought ultimately dominates the argument. That viewpoint wins, because *The Howling* clearly sees wolf nature as part and parcel of *human* nature. The film is dominated by pop culture images of wolves: cartoons, old black-and-white films, literature and psychological claptrap about "the beast within." All these references to wolves describe mankind's strange, timeless obsession with the animal. Perhaps some part of man admires the beast's purity.

After all, Karen is a repressed woman, and "repression is the father of

neurosis,” the film reminds us. Wolves don’t suffer from this failing. This dynamic is revealed best by the two women Bill Neill beds during the film. The first is a repressed human being, his wife Karen. They’re constantly out of synch with one another and never “want the same thing at the same time.” For Bill, this isn’t a problem with Marcia, a sexy werewolf woman who freely expresses her lust and desire instead of feeling ashamed by it. In fact, Marcia transforms into a full-blown werewolf as she makes love, reveling in her lustful nature and desires. This is a leap that Karen, repressed by civilization and dramatized by her descent into the “human jungle” of perversity at the film’s opening, can’t make.

The Howling is a tremendously fun horror movie, and the transformation scenes hold up very well today, although occasionally facets of the protean wolves look rubbery instead of fleshy. The werewolf sex scene, with characters snarling and transforming in the middle of sexual congress, is also a deranged high watermark for the genre in the 1980s. *The Howling*’s depiction of a werewolf society existing unnoticed side by side with human society also makes this another patented “don’t worry/be very afraid”-style film. One where you don’t truly know your neighbors and terror lurks right around the next corner. Watch out, because your husband or wife might just be a werewolf...

LEGACY: Joe Dante’s werewolf hit spawned a series of sequels that are infamous for their rapid decline in quality. *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf* (1986), an unmitigated disaster, was followed by the only-slighter-better *Howling III: The Marsupials* and the direct-to-video *Howling IV: The Original Nightmare*. As of this writing, there have been at least six sequels to Dante’s original.

Looker

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“[T]he film’s revealing, darkly humorous look behind-the-scenes of TV commercial-making will elicit chuckles as well as shudders, leaving audiences thoroughly entertained and, at the same time, more keenly aware of TV’s ability to pull our subconscious strings.”—Gene Triplett, “*Looker*—Gripping Film of Television Exploiting Manipulative Powers,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 6, 1981, Section N.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Albert Finney (Dr. Larry Roberts); Susan Dey (Cindy); James Coburn (John Reston); Leigh Taylor-Young (Jennifer); Dorian Harewood (Lt. Masters); Tim Rossovitch (Moustache Man); Darryl Hickman (Dr. Jim Belfield); Kathryn Wilt (Tina); Terri Welles (Lisa); Michael Gainsborough (Senator Harrison); Ashley Cox (Candy); Catherine Parks (Jan); Terry Kiser (Commercial Director); Georgeann Johnson (Cindy's Mom); Richard Venture (Cindy's Father).

CREW: *Presented by:* the Ladd Company and Warner Bros. *Casting:* Lynn Stalmaster and Associates. *Associate Producer:* John Lugar. *Music:* Barry De Vorzon. *Film Editor:* Carl Kress. *Production Design:* Dean Edward Mitzner. *Director of Photography:* Paul Lohmann. *Producer:* Howard Jeffrey. *"Looker" and "High Wire" Music and Lyrics by:* Barry De Vorzon. *Looker Commercials:* Robert Chandler. *Stunt Coordinator:* Fred Waugh. *Written and Directed by:* Michael Crichton. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

P.O.V.

"It was originally more of a comedy, and the Ladd Company—as well as myself—felt it would work better as a suspense picture. The light approach was more suitable for a TV movie."¹⁰—*Looker* director Michael Crichton discusses the film's tone.

INCANTATION: "The most powerful selling medium in the history of mankind."—A villainous James Coburn describes television in Michael Crichton's social horror movie of 1981, the forward-thinking *Looker*.

SYNOPSIS: Two beautiful TV commercial models die under mysterious circumstances after undergoing plastic surgery by the famous Beverly Hills practitioner, Dr. Larry Roberts (Finney). Another patient who has had surgery, Tina Cassidy (Wilt) returns to Roberts' office and claims that someone is trying to kill her because she is simply "too perfect."

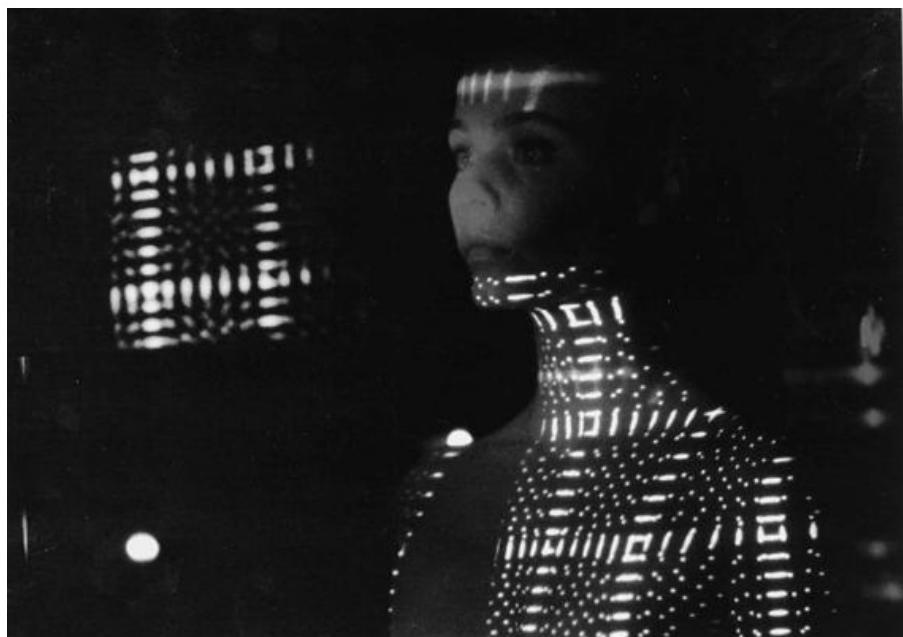
The police suspect that Roberts is actually the murderer, but he follows a lead to a company called Digital Matrix Inc., a research and testing facility that digitally measures models and conducts other visual experiments. Roberts learns that John Reston (Coburn) and his wife Jennifer (Taylor-Young) are somehow involved in a conspiracy, and that another model, the beautiful Cindy (Dey), is in danger.

It seems that Reston wants to completely replace live-actors with digital ones ... enhancing them with subliminal imagery and computer trickery to sell any product imaginable. This is an especially valued technology now that Senator Harrison is running for president, and

Reston wants to make certain that Americans vote for the right candidate.

COMMENTARY: *Looker* is a prophetic social horror film that examines American society's never-ending quest for beauty. Written and directed by best-selling author Michael Crichton, it correctly predicts the age of computer generated actors, yet also understands and conveys the idea of just how powerful a tool television can be, especially for politicians. Thirty seconds of carefully planned images (some even laced with subliminal imagery, like the GOP ad in the 2000 election that equated Democrats with the word **RATS**) can make all the difference in the ferocious world of the sound byte and the 24-hour news cycle.

Looker is also a conspiracy film which pits one man, a plastic surgeon played by Albert Finney, against a corporation with political ties that has a vested interest in the outcome of a presidential candidate. The film posits a new weapon, a "Looker" (Light Ocular Oriented Kinetic Emotive Responses) gun that can paralyze people who view it. Ironically, the gun is compared to the hypnotic power of television. When shot with the gun, a person is dumbfounded, and moments pass without detection. The victim suddenly "wakes up," with time missing. That's not unlike how it feels to watch TV for hours at end, as though time as been stolen or eaten by the rapacious technology.



Has the age of CG actors arrived? Susan Dey will soon find out, in a scene from Michael Crichton's thriller, *Looker* (1981).

The film provokes cynical laughter from the looker gun, which gets used in a car chase, of all things. Imagine driving and losing time, awakening with your hands on the wheel and wondering if you've run through a stop sign, missed an exit or swerved at the wrong time. Of course, today, many cars are equipped with TVs and DVD players, so perhaps the car chase (which ends with Finney driving his car into a shrub and fountain) isn't that far-fetched either.

Looker's finale occurs at Reston Industries, where the computer technology is displayed for the elite and powerful, and James Coburn as the CEO reels off statistics about television, the most powerful selling medium in history. People would voluntarily spend one-fifth of their lives in front of the box watching pictures, he establishes, and that is the key to power in modern America. Only TV, Coburn suggests, can get the "right" people elected. Ironically, the politician who hopes to use the looker technology in the film is one who hides behind a populist cloak. He's just an average guy, fighting for the people! "A vote for me is a vote against the faceless corporations!" he promises, all the while planning to use the powerful imagery of the new technology to sell himself. How can politicians be so blatantly untruthful? Recall that in 2000, candidate George W. Bush, the son of a former president, successfully cast himself as a "Washington outsider."

For all its insights about computer generated imagery, the quest for ever more perfect women (and younger ones too) to star on television, and the image-making of presidential candidates, *Looker* gets one critical element wrong. The Looker technology in the film depends on real sets and props, and as audiences now understand after *Lord of the Rings* and the *Star Wars* prequels, those things aren't necessary. Today, we just need green screens and pieces here and there, to create a fully digital world.

Looker is a compelling, action-packed horror movie about a conspiracy to control our minds through television. It ends, appropriately enough, on a satirical note. The head of Reston Industries dies during a commercial for toothpaste. Yes, he experiences his writhing death throes to the hawking of a product called "Spurt."

The Monster Club

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Vincent Price (Erasmus); John Carradine (Chetwynd-Hayes).

The Shadmock Story: Barbara Kellerman (Angela); Simon Ward (George); James Laurenson (Raven); Geoffrey Bayldon (Psychiatrist).

The Vampire Story: Donald Pleasence (Pickering); Richard Johnson (Father); Britt Ekland (Mother); Warren Saire (Lintom); Anthony Valentine (Mooney); Neil McCarthy (Watson).

The Humgoo Story: Stuart Whitman (Sam); Lesley Dunlop (Luna); Patrick Magee (Innkeeper); Prentis Hancock (Police Escort).

CREW: Jack Gill Presents for CHIPS Production a Sword & Sorcery Production. *Songs by:* B.A. Robertson, Night, The Pretty Things, The Viewers. *Soundtrack Music by:* John Williams, UB40, Expressos, Alan Hawkshaw, John Georgiadis, Douglas Gamley. *Executive Producer:* Bernard J. Kingham. *From the novel by:* R. Chetwynd-Hayes. *Screenplay by:* Edward and Valerie Abraham. *Produced by:* Milton Subotsky. *Associate Producer:* Ron Fry. *Music Coordinator:* Graham Walker. *Production Design:* Tony Curtis. *Director of Photography:* Peter Jessup. *Film Editor:* Peter Tanner. *Casting Director:* Simone Reynolds. *Directed by:* Roy Ward Baker. *MPAA Rating:* Not available. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a dark street corner, a famished vampire named Erasmus (Vincent Price) bites horror novelist R. Chetwynd-Hayes (Carradine) on the neck. This act provides the vampire the nourishment he needs to tide him over. Out of gratitude, Erasmus invites the author to his favorite digs, the nearby Monster Club nightclub.

There, ghouls and goblins dance the night away, and Erasmus and Chetwynd-Hayes discuss monster genealogy. Erasmus illustrates his points by telling stories about different monsters.

The first tale is about a Shadmock, a lonely creature with a devastating whistle. The tale involves a con man (Ward) and his girlfriend Angela (Kellerman) as they attempt to bilk a lonely Shadmock (Laurenson) out of his fortune, with catastrophic results.

Later, Erasmus and Chetwynd-Hayes watch a clip from a new movie

about an evil vampire hunter named Pickering (Pleasence) and his dastardly attempts to kill a kindly vampire and family man (Johnson).

Finally, Erasmus and the horror writer discuss humgoos, a human-ghoul hybrid known for eating carrion. Erasmus recounts the tale of a movie director (Whitman) who happens into a strange, forgotten village of humgoos ... and immediately regrets it.

After all these horror stories, Erasmus nominates Chetwynd-Hayes for membership in the monster club, pointing out that humans are the nastiest monsters of all.

COMMENTARY: *The Monster Club* is a weird but enjoyable old-fashioned horror anthology presided over by two of the genre's elder statesmen, Vincent Price and John Carradine. Although the sight of these two genre greats "getting down" on the disco dance floor might scare away some prospective viewers permanently, this is nonetheless a strong, funny film that makes clever points about human nature. In essence, the movie's didactic premise can be summed up by the phrase, "Can't we all just get along?" Specifically, *The Monster Club* diagrams the not-always pleasant integration of humans and monsters, and is thus a metaphor for race relations.

Surprisingly, *The Monster Club* begins with a homoerotic rendezvous in a dark city alley at night. Writer Chetwynd-Hayes (Carradine), standing at a bookstore window, encounters a famished vampire, Erasmus (Price). Erasmus asks this stranger for a rather intimate favor. He wants to suck the writer's ... *blood*. The writer agrees, submits to the removal of his bodily fluids, and a friendship is forged. The entire tenor of this scene is distinctly homosexual, but then vampirism is always sexual. The blood is the life, and all that, though *The Monster Club* makes it more explicit with the two men having a chance encounter on a city street by nightfall, one seeking to sate his appetite with the other.

From there, the movie heads to the Monster Club, and Erasmus begins telling tales about how men and monsters have a difficult history together. The first story reveals how a lonely monster called a Shadmock is exploited by two crooks, one a beautiful woman. "You have no idea what meeting you has meant to me," the lonely ghoul tells Angela, unaware of her treachery. When the Shadmock, a character treated sympathetically in the film as a lonely guy, learns the truth, he uses his monstrous talent (a whistle) to destroy Angela.

The second story is a reversal of the typical vampire tale, told as

family drama. A young boy is horrified when his vampire daddy (whose motto is “feed without greed”) is hunted and stalked by a ruthless vampire killer. This vampire family, immigrants from “the old country,” is simply trying to make a go of things in the new world, but the vampire hunter is a bad cop, a legend in his department for having killed over two thousand vampires. He dresses in black, carries a violin case (stake and hammer), and looks like he’s come straight from the Mafia.

This story cements *The Monster Club*’s theme that monsters are an attacked, misunderstood minority. After all, how would we feel if someone burst into our house and attacked us in our beds (or caskets)? Fortunately, this tale ends happily for the family. The dad wears a stake-proof vest, and the young boy, the tale’s protagonist, grows up to become a vampire film producer.

The Monster Club’s third story involves a disdained cross between human and monster called a humgoo. It’s an interracial monster that, sadly, has the disgusting habit of feeding on the dead. An unlucky film talent wanders into a town of the humgoos in this, the most frightening of the film’s three tales. When Sam, the story’s hero and another film director, happens into the humgoo town he finds a strange, lonely, half-deserted village. The town boasts a misty gateway that leads to a gloomy, frightening place with no telephones, but lots of monsters. Sam is there scouting locations, arriving not to help those who live in poverty, but to exploit them for his film. Ultimately, the tables are turned as it is Sam who is exploited … as food for the starving humgoos.

After the last story, the action settles down in the Monster Club and Erasmus proposes that Chetwynd-Hayes be allowed to join the elite club. There are standards, however, and no human has ever been admitted. Erasmus suggests a way—after such horrible tales of prejudice and misunderstanding—humans and monsters can find common ground. He suggests that humans merely acknowledge the obvious: that they’re monsters too! In fact, they may be the best of the monsters, the film states in explicit terms. In the past sixty years, according to Erasmus, humans have destroyed millions of their own kind. Although they don’t have fangs or claws, they’ve invented guns, tanks, extermination camps, and atomic bombs.

This is a logic that none of the monsters can deny, and Chetwynd-Hayes is admitted to the brotherhood of monsters amidst much dancing and celebrating. It’s funny, the movie suggests, that mankind invents monsters to terrify itself when all it need do is look to its own

nature and its own history. That's a powerful, almost knock-out punch from a movie so silly and slight, but the film's message rings true. It's ironic that so many of society's moral watchdogs have a problem with vampires, ghouls, werewolves and slashers when there's crime, poverty and war to contend with.

The 1970s was probably the great age for British horror anthologies, with films such as *Tales from The Crypt* (1971) and *Asylum* (1972), but *The Monster Club* makes a good showing. Although the rock 'n' roll interludes included are mostly dire (a misguided attempt to make the film skew young and seem more relevant?) the stories are nonetheless short, punchy, and amusing and the movie comes together to make that glorious statement about the lesser angels of human nature. It's always rewarding when a movie reveals a new perspective, and here, the monsters stand up for theirs. How dare we call *them* monsters! When it comes to monstrosities, we're at the top of the genealogy chart, I guess.

Ms. 45

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"It is impossible to identify the exact chemical elements—or to understand the mysterious alchemy—that combine to create movie iconography. Marilyn Monroe's look of bliss as her white gown billows up from the whoosh of the subway, James Dean brooding in his red leather jacket, Malcolm McDowell sipping milk in the Korova Milkbar, Marlon Brando in his torn T-shirt bellowing for Stella, the Lady and Tramp sharing a single strand of spaghetti—need I go on? These are images and moments that stay with us forever, hard-driven into our subconscious.

"Ladies and gentlemen, to this list I must add Zoe Tamerlis, decked out in a nun's habit, blasting away at everyone in sight at a New York City Halloween party.

"Ms. 45, released in 1981 to a theater nowhere near you, had the grubby look and perverse feel of something made a decade or so earlier. To be more precise, *Ms. 45* seemed to have been shot directly out of the ragged maw of the late 1960s-early 1970s Exploitation Era.

"It also bore more than a passing resemblance to the much better known, much higher-budgeted *Death Wish*. But to that I say: "Charles

Bronson, you are no Zoe Tamerlis.”

“After being raped twice within 30 minutes (by two different assailants in two different locations), a mute seamstress (Ms. Tamerlis) takes matters into her own hands. With her .45 caliber gun—the same model favored by New York City’s favorite 1970s serial killer, Son of Sam (for those appreciative of such details)—she begins blasting a huge gaping hole in Gotham’s seamy underbelly.

“The film contains one legitimately classic sequence in nighttime Central Park—not the safest place for a mute seamstress to take a stroll, unless her aim is true.

“Yet another film unjustly ignored by the Academy...”—Sam Shapiro, guest columnist *The Charlotte Observer*, Film Instructor, UNC Charlotte.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Zoe Tamerlis (Thana/Ms. 45); Phil the Dog (Bogey); Albert Sinkys (Albert); Darlene Stuto (Laurie); Helen McGara (Card); Jimmy Laine (First Rapist); Peter Yellen (Burglar); Vincent Gruppi (Heckler on Corner); Stanley Timms (Pimp); Faith Peters (Prostitute); Lawrence Zaraglia (Arab).

CREW: Rochelle Films Presents a Navaron Film. *Screenplay by:* N.G. St. John. *Music:* Joe Delia. *Photography:* James Momel. *Film Editor:* Christopher Andrews. *Executive Producer:* Rochelle Weisberg. *Sound/Dolly/Effects/Production:* John McIntyre. *Associate Producer:* Mary Kane. *Special Effects:* Matt Vogel, Sue Dalton. *Makeup:* Lisa Monteleone. *Directed by:* Abel Ferrara. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A mute seamstress named Thana (Tamerlis) is brutally raped in an alley after work. When she returns home to her tiny apartment, a burglar is waiting there and also rapes her. Thana battles the burglar and kills him, chopping up his body into tiny pieces and storing them in her refrigerator. The burglar has also left behind a pistol, a colt .45, and now Thana stalks the urban streets, killing any men—pimps, thugs, even wealthy Arabs—who accost her in any fashion.

Thana’s killing spree continues until she decides to turn the weapon on her obnoxious boss at the company Halloween party. She takes her final vengeance while adorning a nun’s habit and wearing ruby red lipstick.

COMMENTARY: The so-called “Rape and Revenge” horror subgenre was a staple of the disco decade, those freewheeling 1970s. Films such as John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1971), Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971), Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) all tackled the subject of rape in one fashion or another—and the victim of this particular crime wasn’t always female.

The 1970s was also, not coincidentally, the decade of *Death Wish* (1974), a movie that concerned an “average” American citizen taking matters of justice into his own hands after the law failed—hence the “revenge.” Charles Bronson played the role again and again in the 1980s, in films including *Death Wish II* (1982), *Death Wish 3* (1985) and *Death Wish IV: The Crackdown* (1987). Playing a cop, Bronson also took vigilante action in *Ten to Midnight* (1983) and *Kinjite: Forbidden Secrets* (1989). Why were these vigilante films (which often also included rape) so popular in the 1980s?

Take the case of New York City. By the 1980s, the city was experiencing a crime rate almost seventy percent higher than the national average. And New York—as the cultural hub of the United States— influenced the national news, movies, television, newspaper articles and more. In other words, what happens in New York doesn’t stay in New York.

According to some statistics, there were more than forty subway crimes each day in New York alone, and so on December 22, 1984 when Bernard Goetz—a subway rider who had already been mugged twice—shot four robbers who demanded his money, this “Subway Vigilante,” as he was nicknamed, was transformed into something of a national hero. Goetz had stood up when the police weren’t there. He didn’t negotiate with the criminals, he didn’t plead, he merely defended himself when the law was ineffective. As Richard Kasiz wrote, in a *New Internationalist* piece called “The Rambo Spirit”:

For many Americans Goetz’s action was a brief release from the intense frustration, sense of powerlessness and fear they have come to feel in relation to urban crime. People experienced a momentary, cathartic hope that justice could be swift and that determined individuals could bring order where governmental authority had so totally failed. Read “Taking the law into one’s own hands” is a very American tradition ... The roots of this vigilante spirit run deep—historically, culturally and psychologically. They are part of the American worldview. In situations where Americans feel frightened, confused and threatened by a breakdown of their social order and way of life,

the vigilante impulse often takes hold.¹¹

These comments on vigilante justice are pertinent primarily as a prologue to a discussion on Abel Ferrara's sizzling *Ms. 45*, a relatively hardcore 1980s rape and revenge vigilante movie that reveals that America was already primed for such an incident. Although this unflinching, uncompromising movie arrived in cinemas well before the Goetz subway incident—and well before President Reagan lauded the vigilante impulses and characteristics of fictional characters like Rambo and James Bond—the winds were already blowing in that direction. Crime had spiraled out of control, and the nation had lost faith in the ability of America's law enforcement to protect them.

Ms. 45 plays upon these contemporary fears of victimization, and its clever visuals are designed specifically to make audiences feel endangered. Early in the film, the camera adopts the viewpoint of mute protagonist Thana as cat-callers ogle and accost her. This subjective, first person camera position effectively makes us—the viewers—the recipients of the barbs and taunts. We feel appropriately threatened.

Later, after Thana is brutally raped in a city alley, Ferrara's camera assumes a high angle position looking down on her, making the point cinematically that she is small, isolated and victimized. When Thana returns home and is raped a second time, it is almost too much to bear, and finally, she fights back.

Following these events, Thana (a name derived from the Greek word *Thanatos*, a manifestation or incarnation of Death) becomes *Ms. 45*, an armed angel of destruction, hellbent on destroying those who have exploited and hurt her. Any man on the street could be a predator, and so Thana begins making pre-emptive strikes. She envisions an assailant in a mirror, reaching for her breasts, but nobody's really there. She lures a photographer to his studio and drinks wine and smokes pot with him and then blows him away.

And this is where *Ms. 45* truly becomes compelling. Ferrara's choice of angles has fostered sympathy with Thana, and by the end of the film, she has adopted a nun's habit, and is so literally wearing a costume, not unlike a superhero (and remember, vigilantes—at least some of them—are revered as such). Yet, Ferrara's game is more complicated than making one sympathetic with the victim of crime and fostering identification with her.

Because Thana is soon the aggressor. Looking for offense where none

was given. Her boss is insensitive and exploitative, but he doesn't deserve death. Likewise many of the men she picks up and murders (or attempts to murder). Thana has gone too far now and does not have a sane perspective. All that's left is her rage and thus the film in some twisted fashion is about how vigilantism, how revenge—even after a terrible incident like a double rape—is a dead end.

The flaw in vigilantism as a concept is that it puts the seeking of justice into the hands of one individual, not the law. And that individual may be right on one occasion, but what about the second occasion? The third? What if that person's moral barometer is not the same as ours? What if a man like Bernard Goetz went free after shooting those robbers, turned around and shot Ivan Boesky? Would we still view him as the hand of justice, or would we view him as dangerous?

This discussion about vigilantism is very much the terrain of *Ms. 45*, though the film ends on a blatantly didactic note regarding sexual politics. To wit, the murderous Thana is finally brought down by a male friend who brandishes the murder weapon—a knife—as though it were a phallus. He holds the knife down between her legs with both hands and thrusts it forward from behind, thus making Thana symbolically a victim of the patriarchy, a female sacrifice on the altar of the male-dominated law and order lobby. So the film reverts back to its original theme: that ultimately females are victims of males in a crime-ridden society and that (male) justice isn't going to protect them.

Whatever its ultimate point or message, *Ms. 45* remains a startling, provocative firecracker of a film and one that relies on a minimum of dialogue and is told through imagery. At times, those images are repellent, but the film lingers in the memory because it asks the audience to adopt a very specific point of view, that of a rape victim. To the film's credit, as audience members we're with Thana as she strikes back, and it's only little bit by bit that we start to realize that she's lost her sense of right and wrong, that a monstrous crime has, in fact, given rise to an equally monstrous crime spree.

Unlike *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Ms. 45* doesn't wallow on nudity or gore, and it's well-shot. The subject matter is violence and sex, and yet still Ferrara evidences a degree of restraint so that the characterizations shine through. In the role of Thana, Zoe Tamerlis is downright beguiling. Viewers will also notice that as Thana becomes more confident and self-assured, she also grows more glamorous and sexier. You can catch more bees with honey than with vinegar.

My Bloody Valentine

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“The film is beautifully photographed, and the utilization of the mine creates powerful imagery...”—Dan Scapperotti, *Cinefantastique*, Volume 11, Number 1, Summer 1981, page 48.

“Coal Miner Harry Warden nearly dies in the shaft while his supervisors live it up at a St. Valentine’s Day dance. Harry’s not happy and commences a killing spree that primarily involves the removal of his victims’ hearts. No such shindig takes place for twenty years; but on that twentieth year, things change, and Harry Warden returns to continue his revenge—or is it *really* Harry Warden? If it sounds bad, it is, but not nearly as bad as it could have been. For a paint-by-numbers holiday slasher show, *My Bloody Valentine* holds up unusually well.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Paul Kelman (T.J.); Lori Hallier (Sarah); Neil Affleck (Axel); Don Francks (Chief Newby); Keith Knight (Hollis); Alf Humphreys (Howard); Cynthia Dale (Patty); Jerry Waterland (Harriet); Jack Van Evera (Happy); Helen Udy (Sylvia); Rob Stein (John); Tom Kovacs (Mike); Peter Cowper (The Miner/Harry Warden); Patricia Hamilton (Mabel); Larry Reynolds (Mayor Hanniger); Jeff Banks (Young Axel).

CREW: Paramount Pictures. *Director of Photography:* Rodney Gibbons. *Supervising Sound Editor:* Jean LaFleur. *Music:* Paul Zaza. *Casting:* Baly Casting. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dwayne McLean. *Special Effects:* The Burman Studios. *Story Concept:* Stephen Miller. *Written by:* John Beard. *Producers:* Andrew Link, John Dunning, Stephen Miller. *Directed by:* George Mihalka. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Roses are red. Violets are blue. One is dead. And so are you.”—The Miner’s (Peter Cowper) Valentine to Mabel (Patricia Hamilton), in George Mihalka’s *My Bloody Valentine*.

SYNOPSIS: Twenty years ago in Valentine’s Bluff, miner Harry Warden (Cowper) was trapped in a cave-in while his supervisors obliviously partied it up at a Valentine’s Day dance. Once free, Harry

went on a wrathful killing spree with his pick-axe, and Valentine's Bluff has never forgotten it, holding a moratorium on celebrating St. Valentine's Day ever since.

But now, on the eve of the first Valentine's Dance in two decades, citizens are being murdered, and a worried Chief Newby (Francks) believes Harry is back with a vengeance. For the safety of the town, he cancels the dance, but several young adults, including the love triangle of T.J. (Kelman), Sarah (Hallier) and Axel (Affleck), decide to hold a party at the mine anyway. When the killer strikes again—and repeatedly—all three are trapped in the claustrophobic labyrinth of the mine, two thousand feet underground.

COMMENTARY: A legend, they say, on Valentine's Day, is a curse that will live on and on...

How can anybody resist a horror movie that ends with its own folk song (see also *Madman* [1982])?

This venture starts off weak and boring, but pulls its elements together and finishes strong, primarily because the coal mine environs pave the way for an unusually alarming and heart-pounding climax. The characters are paper-thin (in keeping with the slasher paradigm) but viewers will still root for them to escape the evil miner chasing them from one dark tunnel to another. Claustrophobics might not want to watch this movie.

The organizing principle in *My Bloody Valentine* is yet another holiday, in this case, Valentine's Day. This grants the film its primary character conflict, a love triangle between Sarah, T.J. and Axel, the name of the action's setting, a town called Valentine's Bluff, and a central opportunity for mayhem and terror, namely a St. Valentine's Day dance. February 14 is a day that also provides the killer an opportunity to send murderous "valentines" to his intended victims, and that's a novel spin on the obscene phone call method of stalking (as depicted in *Prom Night*).

As is par for the course in the slasher paradigm, the killer in *My Bloody Valentine* stands apart from the victim pool (miners and other young lovers) by his dress and weapon. The killer in *My Bloody Valentine* wears miners' overalls and helmet. He's armed with a pick axe. The movie also leads the audience to believe that a crime in the past against miner Harry Warden is the thing that spurs the murderous action in the film.

Useless authority rears its head in Chief Newby, lovers go off from the main group to have sexual intercourse (vice precedes the slice-and-dice) and there's a twist at the end, one involving a red herring. The sting in the tale/tail is that the evil killer escapes into the mine, never to be caught. Sarah, of course, serves as the film's final girl, who endures a terrifying final chase which involves a railcar, a tunnel and even a ladder.

None of this material is new or fresh, and yet *My Bloody Valentine* gains tremendous speed and intensity by setting its climax deep in the mine. The idea of taking a rickety railcar down a long tunnel into darkness is inherently scary, and the film provides shots of the mine walls speeding by. There's also a sustained point-of-view shot looking up the elevator shaft as we descend deeper and deeper into the mine, which also accelerates tension. Also, the sequence wherein the killer approaches the victims, and the audience can chart his path because he's methodically destroying rows of light bulbs as he nears, is downright scary. Down there, surrounded by rock, in a virtual maze, there's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and director George Mihalka frames the action so tightly that every new wall, every new turn is a jolt in the foreground.

As is typical with these kind of films, audience enjoyment is predicated largely upon one's patience (or impatience) with the oft-repeated slasher format. If viewers are fond of this rigid formula, *My Bloody Valentine* is certainly good enough to pass muster, and redeems itself where it counts: in the pulse-pounding climax. If one already has had enough of these films, *My Bloody Valentine* won't be a welcome partner at the dance.

The Prowler

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Vicky Dawson (Pam MacDonald); Christopher Goutman (Deputy Mark London); Lawrence Tierney (Major Chatham); Farley Granger (Sheriff George Fraser); Cindy Weintraub (Lisa); Lisa Dunsheath (Sherry); Bill Nunnery (Hotel Clerk); Thom Bray (Ben); Diane Rode (Sally); Bryan Englund (Paul); Donna Davis (Miss Allison); Carleton Carpenter (1945 MC); Joy Glaccun (Francis Rosemary Chatham); Timothy Wahrer (Roy); John Seitz (Pat Kingsley); Bill Hugh Collins (Otto); Dan Lownsberry (Turner); Douglas Stevenson

(Young Kingsley); Susan Monts (Young Kingsley's Date).

CREW: A Grad Production. *Casting:* Bill Williams. *Art Director:* Roberta Neiman. *Special Makeup and Effects by:* Tom Savini. *Music:* Richard Einhorn. *Screenplay by:* Glenn Leopold, Neal F. Barbera. *Producers:* Joseph Zito, David Streit. *Executive Producer:* James Bochis. *Director of Photography:* Raul Lomas. *Production Designer:* Lorenzo Mans. *Film Editor:* Joel Goodman. *Directed by:* Joseph Zito. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1945, a jilted soldier returns to Avalon Bay on the night of the college graduation dance and vengefully sticks a pitchfork through his former girlfriend and her new beau.

Thirty-five years later, Avalon Bay is preparing to hold the first graduation dance since that bloody night. Before long, the killings begin again, conducted by a soldier outfitted in a black uniform and armed with a long knife and pitchfork. A green deputy, Mark London (Goutman) is left to deal with the emergency while the town sheriff (Granger) is out of town fishing. Mark finds that his girlfriend Pam (Dawson) is right in the middle of the action when her dorm is attacked by the killer. There are a series of bloody murders at the dance hall, in the dorm, and in a pool before Pam and Mark track the killer down to Major Chatham's mansion...

COMMENTARY: In *The Prowler*, victims do not die easily or quickly. A spurned man, “celebrating” the thirty-fifth anniversary of receiving a “Dear John” letter, murders would-be teen partygoers in brutal fashion. Dressed as a WWII soldier (including a gas mask and fatigues), he uses fearsome weapons like a pitchfork and a military-issue knife.

The pitchfork is a particularly gruesome tool, and *The Prowler* has wicked fun working it into the action. In the deadly preamble, the jilted lover picks up his pitchfork and decides to kill the transgressors, his former girlfriend, Rosemary, and her new boyfriend. He follows them to the end of a pier and a gazebo, and then pitchforks them together—as one. In an inspired touch, the killer pushes his foot down into the fork’s heel for added leverage, and pushes the instrument further down into the flesh. That’s entertainment.

Years later, on June 20, 1980, the graduation dance is on the schedule for the first time since that gruesome night in 1945, and some people harbor fears that the killer will return. The sheriff isn’t bothered, and in an example of useless authority, decides it’s the right time for a

fishing trip. Naturally, it's also time for the killer to suit up again, and plenty of blood is spilled on the night of the dance.

In the annals of the slasher, *The Prowler* is bloodier than many of these films, yet also more efficient in creating scares. The graduation dance brings in elements including the jilted lover, the central location, and the all-important victim base (more teens!). Several red herrings are present too, including Jim Turner, still the caretaker on the dance hall grounds after 35 years, and old Major Chatham, who owns a mansion in town. There's also talk of another red herring, a robber who stabbed a guy in another town, Columbus. The final girl is Pam, and she undergoes a lot in this movie. So that's the scorecard.

What permits *The Prowler* to rise above many other slasher films is its blunt-faced approach to violence. There's nothing off-screen here, folks. The killer goes after a girl in the shower, and jams a pitchfork right into her guts. Blood fountains and she screams bloody murder. Her pain is tangibly felt, and that makes the scene far more immediate than the average knife-kill. Later, a mean girl named Lisa is swimming in the pool, and the killer grabs her and drags that fierce-looking knife across her throat, slitting from side to side. The resultant blood-spill is not for the weak of stomach. Finally, the *coup de grâce* is the killer's own execution. Pam shoots him with a shotgun and his head explodes in a great special effects shot.

All this intense violence would no doubt be considered gilding the lily a bit, were director Joseph Zito not so skilled in crafting his chase sequences. One early chase involves Pam as the killer pursues her down the stairs of her dorm and it's major tension as she flees through french doors. The camera captures the killer behind her, all too close. Again, proximity is vital in creating scares during a slasher film. Any time a killer and victim inhabit the same frame but are both moving and jockeying for position, that's a good thing.

During the film's exquisite final chase, Zito uses deep focus to generate terror as Pam runs upstairs into a bedroom and is followed by the killer. She hides under furniture draped in sheets as the killer methodically pokes about the room with his pitchfork. Again, these suspenseful scenes work in tandem with the gore. This is a film where viewers understand all too well what the harrowing result will be if the killer catches another victim.

A twist in the slasher paradigm formula involves the killer's identity. Turns out the sheriff ain't gone fishin' after all ... he's the killer. Thus useless authority and the serial killer have combined into one person.

This is like Dr. Loomis murdering somebody in a *Halloween* movie. Still, the conceit is handled effectively. The sheriff is only a real suspect if one can see past all the red herrings thrown in front of the audience, and that isn't always easy to do.

Finally, there's one scene that just drives the audience mad with anger and frustration, and Zito vets it with delight. As the murders rage in town, Deputy London attempts to contact the vacationing official at his cabin. He can't get through to him because minding the store at the cabins is a really fat, unkempt, tobacco-chawing redneck. This guy is such a jerk, he refuses to help out. In fact, he only *pretends* to attempt to contact the sheriff! He self-importantly stands in the way not just of Deputy London contacting the sheriff (who, of course, isn't there) but between the audience and information it requires about the identity of the killer. Alas, everybody has had to deal with an asshole like this on one occasion or another in life, and *The Prowler* has wicked fun with the character, making viewers want to shout at the screen.

Another nice bit of directorial virtuosity occurs early in the film. Zito uses cross-cutting for ironic purposes, flashing between two "suit-up" scenarios of distinctly different purpose. In one series of shots, the youngsters dress for the graduation dance and prepare for a night of fun. Cross-cut with those images are those of another ritual: The killer dressing in uniform and readying his weaponry for the coming massacre. This is some nice, inventive business, and it grants the ultra-violent and gruesome *The Prowler* a modicum of film style.

Scanners

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"In *Scanners*, the subject matter ... remains fascinating to the end, the effects are exceptional, especially in the blowing up of the head..."—David Quindlan, *The Illustrated Guide to Film Directors*, Barnes and Noble Books, 1983, page 62.

"*Scanners* is a tense and brutal sci-fi thriller, cheap, nasty and fairly lame (save for its exploding heads) but effective at its level."—Jake Horsley, *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery, 1958–1999, Volume #1*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999, page 262.

"So, the scanner people can blow up people's heads. That's a pretty

cool evil superpower, I guess, but nobody seems to do anything evil and yet also cool with it. Maybe this is just too Cronenberg a Cronenberg flick for me—I’m usually happy to go along on the ride in his nightmare dreamscapes, but this one leaves me cold.”—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher*, (www.flickfilosopher.com)

“David Cronenberg makes interesting films, and sometimes I like them. Sometimes I don’t. *Scanners* is one of his more accessible films, and Michael Ironside is always a fun heavy. Hearing him threaten to suck one’s brain dry is a little intimidating. Cronenberg was still evolving with *Scanners*—it’s better than his earlier work, but not as good as he would get. Howard Shore’s music was beginning to shape itself into something interesting as well, still atonal for the most part, but approaching some of the operatic nature that would define much of his best work, from *The Fly* to *Lord of the Rings*. This film really gave exploding heads and pulsing veins an opportunity to shine, if that’s a compliment.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“In the 1980s, David Cronenberg repeatedly managed to strike a perfect balance of ideas and eye candy. One could write a master’s thesis about, say, the relationship between existentialist Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of ‘Otherness’ and *Scanners*, Cronenberg’s ‘telepathic curiosities.’ For those who couldn’t care less about such ramblings, there’s an infamous exploding head sequence and a climactic showdown between two telepathic brothers that ranks as one of the all-time great horror film endings. Despite low production values and some poor acting, *Scanners* delivers the goods on multiple levels and remains one of the best films by one of the genre’s most accomplished auteurs.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

“Guys blowing each other’s heads up merely by thinking. Oh, wouldn’t we all love that power around the office? The director did a good job representing telepathy, which is often difficult to portray on screen.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer O’Neill (Kim Obrist); Stephen Lack (Cameron Vale); Patrick McGoohan (Dr. Paul Ruth); Lawrence Dane (Keller); Michael Ironside (Darryl Revok); Robert Silverman (Benjamin Pierce); Mavor Moore (Treveliyan); Adam Ludwig (Arno Crostic); Lee Murray (Programmer); Fred Doederlein (Dieter); Geza Kovacs (Killer in

Record Store); Victor Knight (Dr. Frans); Karen Fullerton (Pregnant Girl); Margaret Gadbois (Woman in Mall).

CREW: *Presented by:* MGM, Pierre David and Victor Solnicki. *Consultant for Special Makeup Effects:* Dick Smith. *Special Effects:* Gary Zeller. *Micro-effects:* Dennis Pike. *Art Director:* Carol Spier. *Film Editor:* Ronald Sanders. *Music:* Howard Shore. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Executive Producers:* Victor Solnicki, Pierre David. *Produced by:* Claude Heroux. *Stunt Coordinator:* Alex Stevens. *Special Makeup:* Stephan Dupuis, Chris Walas, Tom Schwartz. *Written and Directed by:* David Cronenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A derelict named Cameron Vale (Lack) is captured by security agents for Con Sec at the behest of Dr. Paul Ruth (McGoohan) because he is actually a powerful telepath known as a “scanner.”

Meanwhile, a villainous scanner “rebel leader” named Revok (Ironside) murders a fellow scanner during a Con Sec demonstration of telepathy, causing the unsuspecting telepath’s head to exploded in a gory shower of blood and organic matter.

Ruth wants the unaffiliated Vale to infiltrate and destroy Revok’s scanner underground, but first Vale must learn to suppress the multiple voices he hears in his head by taking Ruth’s specially created drug, Ephemerol.

Once Vale is trained to use his powers, he contacts several scanners in hopes of tracking Revok, including an artist named Benjamin Pierce (Silverman), but is tracked by assassins. Vale teams with a beautiful scanner, Kim Obrist (O’Neill), to stop Revok, but the duo is unaware that Revok has an agent inside Con Sec, an executive named Keller (Dane) who will do anything to keep his role in the scanner conspiracy a secret. Keller murders Dr. Ruth, who is in fact the father of Vale and Revok both. This leads Vale to exact bloody, explosive revenge by confronting Revok.

COMMENTARY: This is *the* exploding head movie to see, if that recommendation carries much weight. David Cronenberg, the talent who presented the world such disconcerting films as *Rabid* (1976) and *The Brood* (1979), returned in the 1980s with *Scanners*, a science fiction horror about telepathy ... and the quest to control it.

There’s so much 1980s subtext in this film, it’s almost difficult to know where to start. One might begin by discussing Cameron Vale, the film’s protagonist, as an outsider or other shunned by society;

written off as a homeless wretch, “a piece of human junk” until the moment his particular skill set is deemed valuable to big business. Until he’s brought in by Ruth, Cameron’s just another homeless nobody, a fellow who eats cast-off food at a mall restaurant and looks as though he hasn’t showered for months. He’s a disenfranchised man, one among many, but as soon as money and power is involved, he’s a wanted man.

Then, regrettably forecasting a world in which media commentator Bill O’Reilly can threaten call-in listeners with frightening-sounding visits from a gestapo called Fox Security, a private “security” force in thrall to Rupert Murdoch’s corporation, there’s *Scanners*’ depiction of Con Sec, a secretive corporation running its own aggressive agenda without, apparently, oversight from the government. Con Sec has its own security branch with armed agents, is protecting a dark secret (a drug trial gone horribly wrong), and now is protecting a “viable” new product line: adult scanners who can read the minds of others. Ideal for industrial espionage, isn’t it? And, they’re Ephemerol users! How convenient! *Scanners* also postulates corporate wars, noting Con Sec’s competitor in the scanning wars, Biocarbon Amalgamated.



Revok’s (Michael Ironside) rage is so powerful that it makes an

enemy's brain explode in David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981).

Admirers of Cronenberg who enjoy his organic, fleshy visions in films like *Existenz* (1999) and *The Fly* (1986) will note that the director here imagines a brand of telepathy that appears more physical than mental. This movie is rich in bulging, popping veins, whitened eyeballs, furrowed brows, nose bleeds and exploding heads. In one scene, an unborn baby even scans somebody from the womb! Cronenberg's favorite theme, organic tissue and machinery united in a new flesh (see *Videodrome* [1983] and *The Fly* [1986]), is also given expression in *Scanners* when the telepaths realize they can bond not merely with one another and normal humans, but with computers. Cameron is able to harness his own mind as a kind of computer modem to access the Con Sec computer network, and this is truly a revolutionary idea. At this point in the early 1980s, computers were not even really talking with other computers, let alone undergoing symbiosis with the human nervous system.

The scanner-vs.-scanner battle at film's end is a high point, as is the first explosive demonstration of "scanning," the movie's legendary trademark. The low points in *Scanners* are probably Stephen Lack's sleepy, empty performance and a pace that could do with a bit of tweaking. Also, why should Cameron Vale agree to hunt down Revok, who is no longer behaving as his papa and the Corporation approve? His very quest in this film doesn't seem very likely, given Vale's personality. Regardless, Cronenberg's movies in the eighties are all of a "piece," and as such, this one is worth analyzing. The themes and ideas that take root here spread across to *Dead Ringers* (1988), which also concerns a relationship between brothers. As a theme, telepathy would also factor importantly in Cronenberg's next effort, the Stephen King-adapted *The Dead Zone* (1983).

Also, I would be remiss if I didn't note that *Scanners* suggests, in some fashion, the screenplays for *The X-Men* (2000) and *X-2* (2003). Although the X-Men are long established as characters in Marvel Comics, the recent films revisit a theme very much in keeping with *Scanners*: evolved or "different" man (mutants) forced to choose how to reckon with the Old Guard, meaning mankind. One side (Magneto-Revok) wants to conquer and destroy; the other side (Xavier-Vale) is mankind's savior and protector, ostensibly selecting co-existence as the path to a peaceful future.

LEGACY: *Scanners* was a big hit on the home video circuit, resulting

in an early '90s direct-to-video franchise which includes *Scanners II: The New Order* (1991) and *Scanners III: The Takeover* (1992).

Scared to Death

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“...typical low-grade West Coast drive-in fare.”—Alan Jones, *Cinefantastique*, Volume 11, Number 1, Summer 1981, page 48.

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Stinson (Ted Lonergan); Diana Davidson (Jennifer Stanton); David Moses (Lou Capell); Toni Jannotta (Sherry Carpenter); Walker Edmiston (Chief Warren); Pamela Bowman (Janie Richter); Michael Muscat (Howard Tindall); Freddie Dawson (Virgil Watson); Tracy Weddle (Kathy Sperry); Joleen Procaro (Kelly); Joseph Daniels (Michael); Stephen Fenning (Scott); Justin Greer (Sandy); Johnny Creer (Victor Colter); John Moskal Jr. (Lab Man); Evan Cole (Medic); Michael Griswold (Dr. Epstein); Robert Short (Ed); William Malone (Alex Waverly); Kermitt Eller (The Syngenor).

CREW: Lone Star International presents a Malone Productions Ltd. International Film. *Music:* Tom Chase, Ardell Hake. *Film Editor:* Warren Chadwick. *Director of Photography:* Patrick Prince. *Based on a story by:* Robert Short and William Malone. *Producers:* Randy Marlis, Gil Shilton. *Sygenor Designed and Built by:* William Malone. *Pod Effects:* Robert Short. *Written and Directed by:* William Malone. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Los Angeles, the police investigate a series of brutal murders that are not actually the work of a psycho-killer, as they suspect, but that of a horrible humanoid monster. Former detective turned pulp novelist Ted Lonergan (Stinson) is drawn into the investigation by his former partner Lou (Moses), even as he romances a beautiful woman, Jennifer (Davidson) he met in a fender bender.

When Jennifer is attacked by the creature at the Aberdeen Research Facility and lapses into a coma, Ted turns the heat on the investigation and learns that the murderer is a highly resilient, genetically engineered monster called a Sygenor that lives by draining the spinal fluid from its victims. Worse, the silver-eyed, synthetic organism is utilizing the city's sewer system to move around.

Ted descends into the sewers to kill the beast, only to find that it is preparing to reproduce.

COMMENTARY: The 1980s brought the world a rash of *Alien* imitators. Some (like *Galaxy of Terror*) found inspiration in *Alien*'s revolutionary, organic production design. Others, like *Inseminoid*, took into account how cleverly *Alien* played with and subverted fears surrounding the human reproductive system. Alas, way too many films went for a much more basic kind of imitation, creating *Alien*-inspired “monster on the loose” movies (like *Creature*), low budgeters armed with the latest in monster suits and special effects. These gooey creations would invariably feature unusual mouth prosthetics (like the extra-terrestrial in Scott’s film) and lay goopy eggs in dank basements.

Scared to Death is yet another low-, low-budget example of the latter type of *Alien* imitator, and yet—given some of the films made after *Alien* (*Biohazard*, anybody?) it’s not half-bad. Set on contemporary Earth (in Los Angeles) rather than in outer space, *Scared to Death* features a very frightening-looking antagonist, one who might just be the Alien’s second cousin, once removed. This beastie boasts a number of external spines and ridges, and smiles with a kisser only a mother could love. It has the requisite probing tongue, just like the alien’s jaw-within-a-jaw-within-a-jaw.



Portrait of man-made evil: the Syngenor in *Scared to Death* (1981).

Reveling in copying its apparent inspiration, *Scared to Death* even stages several of its monster attacks in an *Alien*-trademarked fashion,

with imitative shots of the imposing Syngenor standing upright suddenly from a bent position in the background of the frame, while unsuspecting characters blissfully go about their business, unawares, in the foreground.

There are also the *de rigueur* shots of victims' shaking, twitching feet as they kick in the air, while the alien lifts them up higher and higher. Imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery, but the monster featured here is still kinda scary despite these similarities. Several scenes featuring this thing feel sufficiently creepy and gross to pass muster, with even a jolting "stinger" demanding attention here and there. The film's climax—set in a sewer as Syngenor creeps up on Ted as he tries to destroy the beast's offspring—even provokes a little tension.

Scared to Death also features some good, solid (if not inspired) horror imagery. When a woman is attacked by the monster in her apartment, for instance, the film cuts to a blood-spattered Raggedy Ann doll, both amusing and horrifying. The film's second victim, a girl getting into car in the Hollywood Hills, is ravaged in quick cuts which terminate in some very bloody seat cushions.

Very often, a remarkable film (like *Alien*) inspires other filmmakers to top it. The amazing thing is that sometimes this actually happens. It's not the case here, but it seems unfair to be too hard on *Scared to Death*. It tries hard, and with a bit of ingenuity, succeeds as a low-grade *Alien*.

Most of the acting and dialogue is terrible, and one can certainly do without all the "homages" to well-known names in the genre (one file seen in the film boasts the name Ackerman; another O'Quinn, after *Starlog*'s Kerry O'Quinn). Still, the killings here are inventive and nasty, and that silver-eyed monster is scary enough to warrant a sequel. And hopefully a better movie.

Southern Comfort



Critical Reception

"Instead of raising the tragic possibility that a subculture might disappear, *Southern Comfort* explores our anxiety that the dominant culture itself may be divided and destroyed. [It] seems to suggest that destruction is the price of the desire to use—rather than understand—

another culture.”—Jeffrey H. Mahan, *The Christian Century*, December 16, 1981, page 1322.

“[A] splendidly eerie survival drama with an austere gray beauty and a feeling of languorous danger. Director Walter Hill has created a terrifying mood piece—a blood-and-guts tale that’s also a parody of the military sensibility, a metaphor for the Vietnam War and a study of gracelessness under pressure.”—Michael Sragow, “*Southern Comfort: Replaying Vietnam in a Cajun twilight zone*,” *Rolling Stone*, October 29, 1981, page 33.

“The film’s greatest asset is the characters of the Guardsmen, powerfully drawn with only a few strokes. These ‘civilized’ but allegedly trained soldiers fall apart in a blue-green otherworld, and even the likable heroes ... have brutal and vulnerable sides that emerge during the ordeal.”—Diane Hust, “Heavy Symbolism Ravels Film’s Good Yarn,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 12, 1981, Section: News.

“*Deliverance 2*. But good. Good music, good cinematography, and [the film] adds a little something to the *Deliverance* mix, an anti-authoritarian message that’s a little louder and clearer than in *Deliverance*. As a response to Vietnam, however, this film is quite interesting. The soldiers don’t fare very well against the locals, do they? They don’t do a very good job of winning hearts and minds. Some of the soldiers are quick to shoot, don’t think highly of those they are trained to protect, and don’t really represent what we have in mind when we think of the noble American soldier. They ultimately attempt to pass themselves off as locals to survive—to some degree, that’s the essence of guerrilla warfare. I’m not sure if any of this was intentional by the filmmakers, but it’s definitely worth somebody writing a paper on in film class.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Keith Carradine (Spencer); Powers Boothe (Hardin); Fred Ward (Reece); Franklyn Seales (Simms); T.K. Carter (Tyrone Cribbs); Lewis Smith (Stuckey); Les Lannom (Casper); Carlos Brown (Bowden); Brion James (Cajun Trapper); Peter Coyote (Sgt. Pool); Sonny Landham, Allan Graf, Ned Dowd, Rob Ryder (Hunters).

CREW: A presentation of Cinema Group, a Phoenix film. *Music:* Ry Cooder. *Production Design:* John Vallone. *Director of Photography:* Andrew Laszlo. *Executive Producer:* William J. Immerman. *Written by:*

Michael Kane, Walter Hill, David Giler. *Produced by*: David Giler. *Casting*: Judith Holstra. *Stunt Coordinator*: Bennie Dobbins. *Special Effects*: Larry Cavanaugh. *Directed by*: Walter Hill. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Walter is very funny about blood. He can kill someone in the most awful way with no blood.”—Director of photography Andrew Laszlo discusses the making of *Southern Comfort* in *Filmmakers Monthly*.

Ralph Appelbaum, “An Interview with Director of Photography Andrew Laszlo,” *Filmmakers Monthly*, September 1981, page 22.

SYNOPSIS: In 1973, “Bravo Team” of the Louisiana National Guard is on practice maneuvers in the bayou, a mission to cross thirty-eight kilometers of treacherous natural terrain.

When the squad gets lost and realizes that it must cross a sizable body of water, the leader, Sgt. Pool (Coyote), allows the men to take three Cajun canoes. On the far bank, once out of the water, one of the men, a jokester named Stuckey (Smith) opens fire on the Cajun owners back at shore, but his gun is loaded with blanks. The Cajun hunters respond with lethal force, shooting Sgt. Pool and beginning to hunt the military men.

Desperate, inexperienced and scared, the reservists head deeper into the bayou and take out their frustrations on the first Cajun they find, a French-speaking trapper (James).

They dynamite his house and take him captive over the protests of the level-headed Spencer (Carradine). Meanwhile, the thuggish Reece (Ward) and the squad’s new transfer from El Paso, Hardin (Boothe), take an instant dislike to one another. As the National Guardsmen attempt to escape the bayou, they are killed by the hunters’ booby traps and gunshots, one at a time, until only Hardin and Spencer survive. Fleeing the bayou, they find a ride and are helped by a nice Cajun couple who takes them to a remote Cajun village in the middle of nowhere.

COMMENTARY: A group of arrogant Louisiana National Guard soldiers on training maneuvers during the Vietnam War face terror in “the great primordial swamp,” the bayou, in Walter Hill’s hard-driving and violent polemic, *Southern Comfort*. While 1981 was also the year of the resourceful Vietnam War veteran striking back heroically against corrupt law enforcement officials in *First Blood*, it was this film

that made quite a stir with critics, shedding the polite “support the troops” rhetoric of the 1980s for a more even-handed view of the fog of war, and the behavior of men caught unexpectedly in combat.

Powers Boothe plays Hardin, one of *Southern Comfort*'s ostensible heroes. A chemical engineer who's recently transferred in from Texas, he immediately understands the sort of men he's now training with, and realizes they're “the same dumb rednecks” he's been around his “whole life.” This descriptor proves tragically accurate as the men opt to steal the property of some Cajun hunters, specifically canoes, for their convenience. The Cajuns, depicted in the film as the equivalent of Charlie, a primitive local culture, are viewed by the American soldiers as “dumb asses,” and one of the Guardsmen opens fire (with blanks) on them. This sets off a war, and the Guardsmen come to see the error of their ways. The Cajuns, like the Viet Cong, boast a tactical advantage because they know the local landscape, and because they are capable of resorting to guerrilla tactics, deploying deadly booby traps (one of which is described as being “like a Steel Pussy”) and other hazards for the lost soldiers. Like Charlie, the Cajuns have been underestimated, and this “primitive” culture proves all too resourceful.

Much of the film finds the Guardsmen going around in circles as Cajun hunters pick them off one at a time. Making the plight of the Guardsmen even more dangerous, they lose their leader (Peter Coyote) early, in the equivalent of a decapitation strike. Also—and again mimicking the dynamics of the Vietnam War—the Guardsmen are unable to distinguish good Cajuns from bad Cajuns. They think all the enemies look alike and capture and torture one Cajun (James) who they are convinced must be the one that shot their sarge. The soldiers say heroic things like “There comes a time when you have to abandon principles and do what’s right,” but that’s macho posturing, and a tenet that’s quickly punctured by more bloody events. They torture James’ character and, forecasting the Abu Ghraib situation in 2004, only enrage the locals further.

Tension is generated not just by the frequently invisible, unseen enemy, but in the fear that your allies are idiots who could do anything at any time. For the most part, and excepting one or two characters, the Guardsmen are neither trustworthy nor smart. The movie thus explains rather succinctly why ignorant rednecks are so dangerous, and how—in a crisis situation—they take stupid, ignorant action and scenarios go from bad to worse.

The ineptitude of the Guardsmen is also apparent in the team's misuse

of their resources. They waste bullets continually, at a slow but steady pace, until they don't have even their superior technology to rely on. Ironically, the group is termed "Bravo Team" according to protocol, right up until the very end, yet this group has never been a team, and one senses that is why things go badly. Unlike the Cajuns, who work in silent tandem and strike without warning, the Guardsmen blunder and fail, except for those few—namely Hardin and Spencer—who evidence a degree of common sense.

Southern Comfort shares some thematic elements with John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), though the material has been pumped up to include the 1980s military aesthetic, meaning lots of uniforms and guns. In addition to its reasoning about the failure of the American mission in Vietnam (which *Southern Comfort* suggests results from the inability to work together and understand the nature of the enemy), *Southern Comfort* portrays a home-grown Vietnam right inside our borders, a primitive and dangerous culture existing side by side with our larger and more "refined" civilization. These backwoods people just want to be left alone, but if provoked, they're capable of defending themselves, and do so with deadly force.

The last thirty minutes of *Southern Comfort* are hair-raising and terrifying, as Hardin and Spencer survive the booby traps and gun battles to reach ... a Cajun village. Hill provides a trenchant image of the soldiers' plight as they sit on the back of a Cajun transport, a truck carrying them to "freedom." Placed near them, in a key visualization, are two pigs in cages. The Guardsmen don't know it, but they're in as much imminent danger as the trapped animals. When the men reach the village and intense, increasingly fast Cajun music becomes a near-constant on the film's soundtrack, the locals ominously ready two nooses in the center of town—either for Spencer and Hardin, or for the pigs. Again, the soldiers (and the viewers too) have difficulty understanding this "foreign" enemy and discerning its motives. Finally, the film ends in a flurry of dancing and slow-motion, graphic violence as the Guardsmen are drawn into more battle, this time of a much more personal, bloody variety.

Walter Hill's film effectively captures the manner in which things can go terribly wrong once bullets begin flying. Gunfire is a threshold that, once crossed, is hard to retreat from. "Survival is a mental outlook," one character insists. Indeed, but survival is made exponentially more difficult when your buddy in the fox hole is a moron.

Strange Behavior

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“To curtail the high price of union wages and expensive location shooting, Hollywood producers often substitute Vancouver or Toronto for New York City or Chicago. In fact, this has become standard practice; usually the audience is unaware of the ‘geographical sleight of hand,’ or unable to tell the difference even if they knew.

“In 1981, first-time director Michael Laughlin made a neat little horror film called *Strange Behavior*. A great portion of the film’s mood and tone is directly related to its all-American setting—the heart of the heartland (Kansas or Nebraska, perhaps, all rolling prairies and big red barns). But here’s the kicker: The *entire* movie was filmed in the great state of New Zealand. Knowing this fact ahead of time adds an extra dimension to the experience of viewing *Strange Behavior*—you find yourself scanning the most prosaic outdoor scenes for evidence of, well, New Zealand. It’s a fool’s errand, however—New Zealand appears to look uncannily like Kansas or Nebraska.

But I digress. The basic plot is intriguing. A teenage boy, the son of the local sheriff, becomes increasingly drawn to sinister goings-on at the local college. Kids, or “townies” like himself, have been volunteering their minds and bodies to the Science Dept. in exchange for cash. The experiments they undergo (hypodermic needle plunged straight into the eyeball, followed by days of disorientation and memory loss, zombified behavior, culminating in homicidal rage) seem extreme, and not worth the nominal monetary gain.

Oh, did I mention *Strange Behavior* is also a love story, with the teenager’s romance mirrored by his widowed father’s touching courtship of a family friend? And that New Zealand makes the perfect backdrop for an American horror movie?

As for Michael Laughlin, he went on to make *Strange Invaders* five years later, and then exited the movie business (permanently, it seems). As for me, I still await the completion of his ‘Strange’ Trilogy...”—Sam Shapiro, guest columnist *Charlotte Observer*, film instructor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Murphy (John Brady); Louise Fletcher (Barbara); Dan Shor (Pete Brady); Fiona Lewis (Mrs. Parkinson); Arthur Dignam (Le

Sange); Dey Young (Caroline); Marc McClure (Oliver); Charles Lane (Detective); Scott Brady (Shen); Jim Boelson (Waldo); Elizabeth Cheshire (Lucy Brown); Lulu Sylbert (Oliver's Sister); Wally Parks (Minister).

CREW: World-Northel Presents a Hemdale-Fay Richwhite and South Street Film production of a Michael Laughlin film. *Director of Photography:* Louis Horvath. *Production Design:* Susanna Moore. *Film Editor:* Petra. *Music:* Tangerine Dream. *Special Makeup:* Craig Reardon. *Associate Producer:* Bill Condon. *Executive Producers:* John Daly, David Hemmings, William Faymon. *Producer:* Antony Ginnane. *Written by:* Bill Condon, Michael Laughlin. *Directed by:* Michael Laughlin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A good student, Pete Brady (Shor) wants to attend college at Galesburg University, over the strenuous objections of his father, a widower named John (Murphy). With his friend, Oliver (McClure), Pete heads over to the campus to participate in a weird science experiment being run by Dr. Parkinson (Lewis). The scientist studied under the late Dr. Le Sange (Dignam), who believed that human behavior could be chemically modified.

Meanwhile, the mayor's son is reported missing, and thirteen-year-old Lucy Brown (Cheshire) is nearly killed by a masked assailant at a teenage costume party. Soon, Peter begins to behave strangely, and realizes that he is being programmed by a dead man to murder his father. When John learns that his son is involved in the experiment, it calls up memories of his dead wife, who also once worked for Le Sange. John goes to confront Parkinson at the campus, armed with a shotgun, but is in no way prepared for the horror he confronts in the science lab.

COMMENTARY: This unusual and graphic horror film (filmed in New Zealand) explores the unsettling notion that human beings are actually just “the sum of mechanical activities” in our bodies, hence entirely programmable.

In exploring this idea, *Strange Behavior* includes some terrifying horror sequences and memorable gore sequences, yet the film’s pace is frequently languid, and some of the story details lack clarity. At times, *Strange Behavior* also adopts the commonly seen slasher film paradigm so popular, and that fact actually takes away from the film’s sense of odd originality and quirkiness.

Some moments in *Strange Behavior* are downright scary. There’s a

moment late in the film wherein a helpless Dan Schor, playing young Pete, is strapped to a table by the evil Dr. Parkinson and forced to endure some invasive medical procedures. The sequence builds with genuine suspense as Pete's girlfriend, *Rock and Roll High School*'s Dey Young, comes within meters of rescuing him in time, but ultimately fails. Finally, in the same scene's gruesome punchline, Dr. Parkinson injects a large hypodermic needle directly into Peter's left eye. *On camera*. Blood runs down his bruised eye shortly thereafter, resembling a crimson tear trail.

Another surprisingly effective (and unexpected) moment finds Pete—post-op—excusing himself to use a diner's men's room. The camera follows him into the cramped stall, and an over-the-shoulder shot reveals him pissing thick, red blood instead of urine. The fluid spatters all over the immaculate white porcelain of the toilet bowl, and it's a gruesome image. Coupled with the film's dreamy score (by Tangerine Dream), these images succeed in getting under one's skin.

Despite such high yield horror moments, *Strange Behavior* tends to drop the narrative ball from time to time. The film's "surprise" ending depends on an understanding of a back story involving a triangle between John, his dead wife and the evil scientist, Le Sange. This historical material is revealed in muddy, all-or-nothing fashion during an ill-placed exposition-heavy scene vetted by Louise Fletcher.

Many details are left unanswered, and the question of who knows what and when is left vague and confusing. For instance, Michael Murphy's character guesses fairly early on that Le Sange isn't really dead. But why has he been harboring this suspicion in secret for so long? Especially if he believes Le Sange is killing people in town, avenging himself upon the people who took John's side in a past conflict?

Much of this could have been explained more succinctly. Likewise, the film's denouement, occurring when Peter is ordered to kill his father, ends in a moment that is truly surprising, but pretty much unmotivated by any knowledge that the character (Peter) would believably possess at that very moment. Furthermore, a computer read-out seen earlier in the film makes note of Pete's precise programming, and it features the name of his victim (John Brady), the time of death (9:00 PM) and the date. So Le Sange's directive to "kill your father" seems like it would prove secondary to that programmed information, and would directly contradict Pete's final action.

Suspense is also defused by the unfortunate decision to reveal the

faces of the various “programmed” killers after some sequences. There’s a great chase here involving young Lucy Brown, a costume party, a stalker, and a swimming pool. However, it ends with the reveal that Oliver, Marc McClure of *Superman* (1978) fame, is the killer. That’s a pretty significant discovery, but *Strange Behavior* does nothing with the important information, and McClure’s character is never seen or mentioned again.

Strange Behavior includes quirks aplenty, including a costume party wherein the teens seem to dress exclusively as 1960s TV stars (from *The Munsters*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, and *Batman*) and all dance precisely in step with each other, a comment, perhaps that they’ve been “programmed” by the pop culture as much as the evil scientist. Make no mistake, this isn’t a bad film, but it tends to drag, and its revelations don’t make much sense. *Strange Behavior* is a movie that is just a hair less than the sum of its mechanical activities.

Wolfen

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“*Wolfen* combines imaginative techniques, serious themes, and a thriller-detection plot to produce a film that is powerful and emotionally involving.”—Timothy W. Johnson, *Magill’s Cinema Annual 1982: A Survey of 1981 Films*, Salem Press, 1982, page 384.

“I can see why [the filmmakers] wanted to get out of bed in the morning: they had real challenges, both to skill and imagination, and they had the gifts to meet them. If you can go to *Wolfen* and see and hear it without bothering about the human beings in it, you can enjoy what these technicians did.”—Stanley Kauffmann, “Brand New Re-runs,” *The New Republic*, August 7, 1981, page 24.

“[A]s terrifying [a movie] as you’re likely to see.... But you’re also unlikely to see a movie that is quite this gory (lots of dismembered body parts laying around and scenes in a morgue) or quite so pretentious, thematically muddled, and just plain mad.”—Joy Gould Boyum, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 1981, page 19.

“The film lacks something in narrative coherence, but is nonetheless affecting, and especially strong in visual imagination. Stunning use is made of locations in Manhattan and devastated areas of the South Bronx. Good performance by Albert Finney in the leading role.”—

Cast and Crew

CAST: Albert Finney (Detective Dewey Wilson); Diane Venora (Rebecca Neff); Edward James Olmos (Eddie Holt); Gregory Hines (Whittington); Tom Noonan (Ferguson); Dick O'Neill (Warren); Dehl Bert (Old Indian); Peter Michael Goetz (Ross); Sam Gray (Mayor); Ralph Bell (Commissioner); Max M. Brown (Christopher Vanderveer); Reginald Vel Johnson (Morgue Attendant); James Tolkan (Baldy); John McCurra (Sayad).

CREW: Orion Pictures Presents a King-Hitzig Production of a Michael Wadleigh Film. *Music:* James Horner. *Casting:* Cis Corman. *Special Effects:* Robert Blalock. *Steadicam Photography:* Garrett Brown. *Production Designer:* Paul Sylbert. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Fisher. *Executive Producer:* Alan King. *Based on the novel by:* Whitley Streiber. *Story and Screenplay by:* David Eyre, Michael Wadleigh. *Producer:* Rupert Hitzig. *Stunt Coordinator:* Vic Magnotta. *Costume Designer:* John Boxer. *Animal Technical Support:* George N. Toth. *Special Effects Makeup:* Carl Fullerton. *Directed by:* Michael Wadleigh. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 115 minutes.

INCANTATION: “They can see two looks away. They can hear a cloud pass overhead ... Their world is older, more finished, more complete. They kill the sick, the abandoned, those who will not be missed. They kill to survive. They kill to protect.”—A Native American describes the Old Ones to Dewey Wilson (Albert Finney) in Michael Wadleigh’s *Wolfen*.

SYNOPSIS: Detective Dewey Wilson (Finney) teams up with detective Rebecca Neff (Venora) to investigate the mysterious and brutal murders of two well-to-do New Yorkers spearheading an urban renewal program in the South Bronx, but an autopsy provides little data about the origin of the violent attackers.

Although authorities believe that international terrorists may be behind the murders, the discovery of non-human hairs at the crime scene—those of *canis lupis*, wolves—leads Dewey to a local Indian agitator, Eddie Holt (Olmos), who claims he can shape shift into animals (that boast is not true). Dewey delves into Native American culture and learns of the Wolfen, a race of highly intelligent wolves who once shared land with the Indians but, because of man’s slaughter, have moved to the “new wilderness,” the urban jungle of the Bronx, and are using it as a feeding and hunting ground. They are

protecting their new territory fiercely, a fact which Dewey, Rebecca and police commissioner Warren (O'Neill) learn first-hand when they are ambushed by the Wolfen on a city street.

COMMENTARY: An underrated 1980s gem, *Wolfen* is a stunningly photographed horror poem, an environmental tale of long-lived predators—supernatural wolf creatures—moving into New York's worst areas, particularly the Bronx, because there's no place left for them in the world. When threatened by the specter of urban renewal and a new waterfront project, the wolves act out of territoriality to protect their hunting grounds from the threat of sprawl.

Michael Wadleigh, the talent who directed the unforgettable *Woodstock* (1971), a film document that defined the love generation, here reveals a flair for generating potent imagery. Wadleigh films the “bad parts of town,” the places where bums hang out, as though they're a genuine urban disaster area, a war zone of sorts, and yet there's no movie fakery here. This is a real location, amidst a modern, technological city, even though it appears to be in ruins. One of the finest set pieces in the film involves a stakeout by policeman Wilson (Albert Finney) in the top level of one of these half-destroyed buildings. The sequence achieves escape velocity with some incredible, racing steadicam shots down a stairwell and all under the P.O.V. auspices of *Wolfen*-cam, a frequent camera position in the film.

The police procedural aspect of *Wolfen* is not nearly so interesting as its environmental message, that the wildlife, by necessity, will come to urban settings if their natural habitats are destroyed. The ancient Wolfen, after all, must live *somewhere*. Human avarice, overpopulation and corporate greed conspire to put Wolfen and Man on a deadly collision course, and the film ends with some examples of that combat. In particular, there's a gruesome decapitation that closes the film. The severed head rolls into view, the dead man's mouth still muttering as the head lies on concrete.

In some instances, *Wolfen* is duller than it ought to be, and a subplot about a security company pursuing terrorists goes nowhere, but nonetheless it is brimming with memorable visuals, including a scene set high atop a bridge which is certain to provoke vertigo. The threat of the Wolfen is also, like so much of the film, strangely beautiful. Watching these wolves in action is remarkable, and one feels a kinship and admiration for their kind. They're fighting for survival too, and the abandoned city is their last chance to roam and live free.

1982

January 19: At a press conference, President Reagan erroneously reports a million more people are employed than in 1980 when he took office. In fact, 100,000 fewer people are employed.

March 5: Popular comedian, movie star and Saturday Night Live alum John Belushi dies in a hotel room of a fatal drug and alcohol overdose.

April 2: The Falkland Islands War between Great Britain and Argentina begins. Argentina surrenders in June; the war lasted just seventy-four days.

June 6: Under Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel invades Lebanon.

June 11: Steven Spielberg's E.T. the Extra Terrestrial premieres nationwide and becomes the largest grossing film of the summer of '82; and then the largest grossing film of all time...

June 12: Three-quarters of a million Americans protest against nuclear arms in New York, at a rally in Central Park.

September 30: In Chicago, seven people are killed after someone laces Extra-Strength Tylenol tablets with cyanide.

November: America plunges into its deepest economic recession since the Great Depression. Nine million Americans unemployed.

November 3: Election Day. Reagan's GOP loses more than two dozen seats in the House of Representatives, and seven state governorships.

November 10: Leonid Brezhnev dies and is replaced by Yuri Andropov.

November 29: The Soviet Union invades Afghanistan. The U.N. General Assembly passes a resolution condemning the action.

December 2: Barney Clark, a sixty-one-year old man, becomes the world's first recipient of an artificial heart. He dies just over 110 days after the surgery.

December 4: Jobless rates in the United States reach their highest since the Great Depression. Nearly 12 million Americans are out of work.

Alone in the Dark

★ ★ ★

“Incredibly inept and tasteless—not to mention boring—horror flick. Inane rubbish...”—Howard Maxford, *The A-Z of Horror Films*, Indiana University Press, 1997, page 20.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jack Palance (Col. Hawks); Donald Pleasence (Dr. Leo Bain); Martin Landau (Byron “Preacher” Sutcliff); Dwight Schultz (Dr. Daniel Potter); Erland Van Lidth (Ronald “Fatty” Ester); Deborah Hedwell (Nell Potter); Lee Taylor Allan (Toni Potter); Phillip Clark (Tom Smith/Skagg/”The Bleeder”); Elizabeth Ward (Lyla Potter); Brent Jennings (Ray Curtis); Gordon Watkins (Det. Barnett); Carol Levy (Bunky); Keith Reddin (Billy); Annie Korzen (Marissa Hall); Lin Shaye (Receptionist at Haven); Dorothy Dorian James (Mom); John Weissman (Bicycle Messenger); Jana Schneider (Spaced-Out Girl at Club); Larry Pine (Dr. Harry Merton); Frederick Coffin (Jim Gable); Mallory Jones (Anchor Woman); Laura Esterman (Woman Voyager); Earl Michael Reed (Cursing Voyager); The Sick Fucks (Themselves).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a Robert Shaye Production, A Jack Sholder Film. *Director of Photography:* Joseph Mangine. *Film Editor:* Arline Garson. *Art Director:* Peter Monroe. *Casting:* Deedee Wehle. *Music:* Renato Serio. *Story by:* Jack Sholder, Robert Shaye, Michael Harpster. *Associate Producer:* Sara Risher. *Executive Producer:* Benni Korzen. *Produced by:* Robert Shaye. *Special Makeup by:* Tom Brumberger, Don Lumpkin. *Toni’s Apparition Created by:* Tom Savini. *Directed by:* Jack Sholder. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Daniel Potter (Schultz), a psychologist, arrives at the rural mental asylum known as “The Haven” to work under the batty, indulgent Dr. Leo Bain (Pleasence), unaware that the maddest of the inmates incarcerated there—“Preacher” (Landau), “Fatty” (Van Lidth), “The Bleeder” (Clark) and Colonel Hawks (Palance)—believe that Potter killed his predecessor and their friend, Dr. Harry Merton (Pine). Paranoid that he will attempt to murder them too, the violent inmates decide to take action and break out to attack Potter’s house and family in suburban Springwood, New Jersey.

When a black-out occurs, the lunatics escape from the asylum and acquire weapons during a riot and looting, then proceed to the house. Preacher—who likes to burn churches and people—kills a bicycle messenger en route. Fatty, a child rapist, pretends to be the babysitter of Potter’s daughter, Lyla (Ward). The villainous Colonel murders the Potter family babysitter Bunky (Levy) and her boyfriend Billy

(Reddin).

A night of terror ensues in which Dr. Potter tries to save his wife Nell (Hedwell), his off-balance sister Toni (Allan)—who is afraid of the dark—and Lyla from the mad killers. Unbeknownst to Daniel, there is one more killer laying in wait, and he is closer to the family than Daniel could possibly know...

COMMENTARY: Lunatics are running the asylum, the outside world, and indeed the nation itself in Jack Sholder's sharply satirical and highly enjoyable horror thriller, *Alone in the Dark*. The film lands a "normal" suburban family in desperate danger during a power outage as lunatic killers invade their home and imperil the white bread Potters.

Jack Sholder's *modus operandi* is to reveal that down is up, up is down, and that the world itself is nuts. He begins this essay on insanity with an asylum called— straight-faced—"The Haven," as though it's a harbor, port or place of sanctuary from insanity, when quite the opposite is true. For this is an asylum where the inmates are kept in their rooms without bars on their doors, and in which the head doctor, played by Donald Pleasence, is a nutcase who smokes weed. The patients are not referred to as patients in The Haven, but as "voyagers." In other words, their madness is denied just as Pleasence's madness is denied.

Outside the asylum, Sholder depicts a world where teens worship a band called The Sick Fucks. Teens attend their Springwood concert, where the band sings lyrics such as "Chop, Chop" and the audience wields axe props. This scene reveals how America's violence has polluted the pop culture. Immoral acts like murder are celebrated in song, and screaming, adoring fans play "hack" during the Sick Fucks' performance. And this is normal?

It isn't just the Haven or the pop culture that is sick in America, however, it's the priorities of the nation itself. Dwight Shultz's wife in the film attends an anti-nuclear rally. A poster in one composition declares "Destroy Nuclear Power Before It Destroys Us!" A noble sentiment, and yet all of the protesters are rounded up as a menace to society and jailed for daring to express their pacifist view. The official policy of the United States—a nuclear build-up as deterrent (and Ronald Reagan's *winnable* nuclear war)—is the real insanity, yet those who speak up against it are arrested and jailed by law enforcement authorities.

Because the world is stark, raving mad in *Alone in the Dark*, the escapees from the asylum draw little attention from anybody, at least at first. Fat Ronald, a sick psychotic killer, is mistaken immediately as just the “new babysitter,” by Lyla. No alarms sound in her head when a stranger shows up in her house and Binky, the usual babysitter, is MIA. Likewise, the fourth anonymous escapee, the so-called “Bleeder,” integrates into the family and is deemed a normal person ... until he’s ready to strike. That’s how ingrained insanity is, *Alone in the Dark* tells us: We can’t even recognize it in our midst.

“It’s not just us crazy ones who kill. We all kill, don’t we, doctor?” one of the escapees says at a pertinent point, again asking audiences to consider the celebration of violence in the culture and a national agenda which includes a build-up of weapons that could destroy the surface of the Earth dozens of times over. Finally, the film ends with Jack Palance’s character, Hawks, on the loose. Not surprisingly, he goes to a rock show and his violence is applauded there. He attends the concert a hero, and the audience loves him. He’s a murderer and a monster, but in this upside-down, violence-and-death-worshiping society, he’s the top dog.

In addition to being quite funny at times (the film also makes a point of chiding popular psychology), *Alone in the Dark* is a perturbing film that may remind some of the savage cinema high points of the 1970s, particularly *The Hills Have Eyes*. Here, a family household is held under siege for most of the film, and the attack is distressing in its intensity. One character gets a meat cleaver to the spine, and when his head hits the door moulding, blood splatters everywhere. In another moment, Mother Potter is forced to become a killer: After a brief hesitation, she stabs the Bleeder in the guts.

Except for a few dull moments, *Alone in the Dark* is overall a quite exhilarating and pulse-pounding movie. The horror aficionado who expects gruesome touches and an increased heart rate will be more than satisfied with the manner in which Sholder escalates the attacks on the house, tricks the audience with a red herring, and still finds the time to make a trenchant point about life in America in the 1980s.

Amityville 2: The Possession

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Yo, Paulsie, you slummin’ here or what? A loose retelling of the Di Feo murders that inspired much of the ludicrous *Amityville Horror*’s mythology. There were some good actors in this film. Why did they make it?”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Olson (Father Adamski); Burt Young (Anthony Montelli); Rutanya Alda (Dolores Montelli); Jack Magner (Sonny Montelli); Andrew Prine (Father Tom); Diane Franklin (Trish); Moses Gunn (Turner); Ted Ross (Mr. Booth); Erika Katz (Jan Monteli); Brent Katz (Mark Montelli); Leonardo Cimino (Chancellor); Danny Aiello III (Removal Man #1); Gilbert Stafford (Removal Man #2); Allan Dellay (Judge); Martin Donegan (Detective Cortez).

CREW: *Presented by:* Dino De Laurentiis. *Director of Photography:* Franco Di Giacomo. *Production Designer:* Perluigi Basile. *Music:* Lalo Schifrin. *Film Editor:* Sam O’Steen. *Executive Producer:* Bernard Williams. *Screenplay:* Tommy Lee Wallace. *From the book “Murder in Amityville” by:* Hans Holzer. *Produced by:* Ira N. Smith, Stephen R. Greenwald. *Special Makeup Created by:* John Caglione, Jr. *Casting:* Navarro-Bertoni Casting. *Religious Consultant:* Father Thomas Bermingham. *Demonology Advisors:* Ed and Lorraine Warren. *Directed by:* Damiano Damiani. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Montelli family moves into a home for sale in Amityville, Long Island, and is immediately vexed by supernatural incidents. The eldest Montelli child, Sonny (Magner), seems the most susceptible to demonic influences, and hears a voice urging him to shoot his abusive father, molest his young sister, and murder his family.

Mrs. Montelli (Alda) petitions a local priest, Father Adamski (Olson), to bless the house, but a domestic dispute between Sonny and Mr. Montelli curtails the ritual. After consummating an incestuous sexual relationship with his sister Trish (Franklin), Sonny kills his family. Father Adamski realizes that Sonny is possessed by a demon and breaks him out of jail to exorcise it. The exorcism takes place at the Amityville house at night, with the police closing in.

COMMENTARY: In truth, *Amityville 2: The Possession* has more in common with *The Exorcist* (1973) than it does with the first *Amityville Horror* (1979). True, the house is the fulcrum for all the supernatural activity, but most of the story involves Sonny, a boy who is possessed

by a demon, and the efforts of a priest (James Olson) to free him.

But that all comes after the requisite haunted house clichés get trotted out. As usual, a dense family moves into a house with a price that's just too good to be true, and then fail to heed the signs that the house is "inhabited" by malevolent spirits. In *Amityville 2*, those signs include a kitchen sink that spouts blood, windows that won't open, infestations of flies (and mud), a mirror that falls off the wall when the family tries to say grace, mysterious knocks on the doors when nobody is present, and the ever-popular secret room in the basement that may be the gateway to Hell. Here, for good measure, a copy of the Bible also gets shredded by EVIL.

The first *Amityville Horror* boasted an incredible metaphor about home ownership as the real terror. Its sequel doesn't work on such a rarified, allegorical stratum, but it is spooky, and the film's first fifteen minutes establish an eerie, creepy mood with such incidents as the backwards walk and scare (when a character walks backwards in a scene and then bumps into something or someone), and the "demon cam," a P.O.V. shot of the house's interior from the spirit's perspective. Voices emanating from the basement also get the blood pumping, but before long the film shifts gears to more explicitly involve the possession, a pale and rather unsavory reflection of the real-life events that occurred in the house with the Di Feo family.

How does evil get a foothold in Sonny? After seeing the film, one might conclude that adolescence and its accompanying urges have made him vulnerable. He shares a creepy, pseudo-incestuous relationship with his sister, a friendship that borders on flirting and revolves around them visiting each other's bedrooms a lot. As my wife Kathryn (a therapist) noted during these scenes: "This is a family that needs to establish more boundaries."

Perhaps it's this unhealthy desire that lands the demon in Sonny's body. There's an impressive shot in the film that heralds the demon's fascination with Sonny. The shot starts at a high angle above Sonny's shoulders, but then the camera swoops over—*upside down*—in front of him—and rights itself. This is a low-budget but effective way of revealing that the airborne demon has chosen his target. When the demon makes his move, his entrance into Sonny is, appropriately, slightly sexual. Sonny is thrown backwards on his bed, and his shirt is lifted up. Something from far above (the camera, actually) then continues to ram at his midsection and exposed abdomen. It's as though he's been impregnated with evil. This is wholly appropriate given the lust the teenage Sonny has been keeping hidden deep

within.

After Sonny has become conveniently possessed by a demon, he is able to explore his urges regarding Trish, his sister. He asks her to pose on the bed for him, and she does it. "Take off your nightgown," he implores. "Just for a second..." To their mother's horror, Trish and Sonny eventually have intimate relations, and now the action explodes—literally. On a dark and stormy night (of course), Sonny murders his entire family, as if succumbing to one urge (sexual) has allowed him to succumb to others even more vile. Once he bolts the doors (so no one can escape the house) and smashes the phones, the movie generates a feeling of entrapment, terror and inevitability. His family members, his victims have nowhere to run, no way to escape.

The scenes involving Sonny and Trish leading up to the massacre are probably the film's best. Sonny grows increasingly horrible and discolored looking before our eyes, as if the evil inside is twisting his outsides. Lalo Schifrin's score is consistent with the first film and highly effective at generating goose bumps. The movie itself is well-shot and adequately acted. However, when it finally winds its way down into an *Exorcist* knock-off, it loses a lot of steam.

For one thing, the demon possessing Sonny is awfully polite and well-informed. When he learns about the prospect of an exorcism to be performed by Father Adamski, the demon says "You can't do that. You're not authorized." How very thoughtful of the evil demon to think about proper protocol at a time like this! So what begins as a creepy meditation on family relations, incest and the demons seething within an adolescent boy ends in a haunted house with an exorcism and furniture flying around by demonic telekinesis. The makeup is good, but the final solution, that the demon should go into Father Damski, also evokes Jason Miller and *The Exorcist*. Finally, with the demon expelled, Sonny is left alive, and the movie ends. But let's face it, who's going to believe his defense that he killed his family while possessed by a demon? That's not a valid legal argument, and his only witness, the priest, is dead. Thus *Amityville 2: The Possession* ends with a fake happy ending. Ding dong, the demon is dead, but Sonny's going to be reaching for the soap for a long time during his life sentence in a maximum security prison. For sure.

Basket Case

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“*Basket Case* is a gritty and grimy exploitation shocker featuring all of the genre’s most tried and true formulas. Blood, guts, humor, nudity, seedy locations and one damned weird movie monster are wildly hammered home. Director Frank Henenlotter gives a humble nod to his mentor, H.G. Lewis, but then forges ahead to break new ground—maybe ground that some would rather have not seen broken. Just the same, *Basket Case* remains, quite possibly, the last great drive-in/grindhouse feature to spatter itself across the silver screen.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

“Frank Henenlotter films are their own special genre, and *Basket Case* really made an impact on first viewing, even if only because it captured the mood of the era’s Times Square better than any film except maybe *Taxi Driver*. This is an element of cheese in Henenlotter’s films, but while that might be a drawback to other films, it adds something here—an almost freakish verisimilitude. Like Don Coscarelli, Henenlotter does his best work when he has to rely on ingenuity rather than money, and *Basket Case* looks like it cost about four dollars, but the ingenuity is off the scale. It’s kind of creepy, but this is horror at its most fun.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kevin Van Hentenryck (Duane Bradley); Terri Susan Smith (Sharon); Beverly Bonner (Casey); Robert Vogel (Hotel Manager); Diana Browne (Dr. Kutter); Lloyd Pace (Dr. Needleman); Bill Freeman (Dr. Lefflander); Joe Clarke (O’Donovan); Ruth Newman (Duane’s Aunt); Richard Pierce (Duane’s Father); Sean McCabe (Young Duane); Dorothy Strongin (Josephine); Kerry Buff (Detective); Tom Robinson (Thief in Theater); Chris Babson (Kutter’s Date); Bruce Frankel (Second Detective); Pat Ivers, Emily Armstrong (Street Girls); Russell Fritz (Casey’s John); Maria T. Newland (Patient); Florence Shultz, Mary Ellen Shultz (Nurses); Constantine Scopas, Charles Stanley, Sydney Best, Johnny Ray Williams (Hotel Tenants).

CREW: An Analysis Film Corp. Presentation, an Ilevins/Henenlotter Production. *Director of Photography:* Bruce Torbet. *Music:* Gus Russo. *Production Executive:* Ray Sundlin. *Special Makeup Effects:* Kevin Haney, John Caglione Jr. *Executive Producers:* Arnie Bruck, Tom Kaye. *Producer:* Edgar Ilevins. *Directed by:* Frank Henenlotter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A diffident young man named Duane (Van Hentenryck) keeps his monstrously deformed and psychotic (and severed) Siamese twin, Belial, in a picnic basket. Duane checks into the seedy Hotel Broslin in New York on a mission of vengeance: He and Belial are systematically murdering the three doctors who performed the separation surgery on the twins, years earlier. Duane soon falls in love with the physician's receptionist, Sharon (Smith). Belial grows jealous of Duane's relationship with another person, fearing he will be left behind, and goes after Sharon.

Duane is too late to save his love, but now he realizes that as much as he loves his twisted, mad brother, he must destroy him. The final confrontation takes place in Room 7 of the Hotel Broslin, high above the sleazy streets.

COMMENTARY: Golly, it's an honest-to-goodness exploitation, drive-in movie from the 1980s, and one shot on location in grimy, porn-infested Times Square to boot! Wonders never cease.

In case you couldn't tell from that description, *Basket Case* is a down-and-dirty effort from independent filmmaker Frank Henenlotter, who's nearly a film industry himself and who also contributes the stunning *Brain Damage* (1988) to the 1980s horror roster. But *Basket Case* is Henenlotter's baby, his *cause celebre*, and it's a fine, competent low-budget effort that generates thrills and discomfort not merely from its tale of symbiotic (and separated) Siamese twins, but from its authentic sense of place. New York City has never felt more delightfully and dangerously squalid. The bizarre and tatty performers, the unpleasant settings (often crummy hotel rooms) and all the unsavory details are perfectly captured with an artistic eye towards the shoddy and the unpleasant.

Basket Case concerns a pair of Siamese twins separated at birth, one normal to all outward appearances (though slightly wacked, it seems), and the other a hideous little pound of deformed flesh. The early portions of the film work splendidly and because Henenlotter builds a sense of morbid curiosity into the plot. Tantalizingly, Belial isn't revealed for quite a time and everybody in the film, including the audience, wants to know *precisely* what Duane is hiding in that oversized basket. The answer doesn't disappoint, although a few stop-motion animation sequences fail to convince. Belial is a nasty little critter with an appetite for murder.

A great number of 1980s movies concern "the monkey" on the hero's back, a sidekick, friend or enemy who urges the protagonist to make

terrible decisions. Aylmer fits the bill in *Brain Damage*, and so does Belial in *Basket Case*. He ends up ruining everything for his normal-seeming brother, even killing his girlfriend. Worse, Belial seems to have sexual intercourse with Sharon, or rather the camera does. When she screams in terror, Belial chokes and kills her. Despite the murderous tendencies of Belial, the film ends on a sensitive note as brothers die together (along with the ubiquitous basket).

Basket Case is oddly compelling, deeply disturbing and inexplicably touching. Like *It's Alive* (1973) before it, the film examines the arguments surrounding abortion (a hot-button issue in the 1980s as well as today). In gripping flashback, the film depicts the manner in which baby Belial—indisputably a life—is mindlessly tossed out into the trash in a Glad Bag. It's a terrible image, a life discarded without a care or second thought. And yet, is a deformed monster such as Belial actually *worth* saving? Should he have been mercifully terminated rather than forced to live as he is, a thing more than a man?

Basket Case hedges its bets and appears to come down on neither side of the pro-life/pro-choice equation. On the one hand, Belial is a murderous, nasty little bugger, but on the other, he's clearly capable of expressing love. In one oddly moving scene, this diminutive monster sits astride sleeping Duane's chest and watches his brother slumber peacefully. It's a quiet, meaningful moment.

I can't believe that this little foam rubber monster could create such powerful emotions in a viewer, but Belial seems to express emotion in this instant; a feeling of brotherly love. And, from a certain point of view, his murderous acts are committed because he's trying to protect Duane, right? Or keep his brother for himself (in the case of Sharon's) murder. He's jealous and impulsive, but maybe not so inhuman after all. All he wants is love; he fears losing the only love he's ever known (that of his brother).

Any movie that can make one feel empathy and understanding for a tiny, red-eyed lump of malformed skin must have something unusual going for it. *Basket Case* does. It's got Henenlotter's off-kilter sensibility, and for that reason is a remarkable effort, and more effective than you might imagine.

The Beast Within

★★

Critical Reception

"I don't know about you, but I can't hear cicadas in the summer without thinking of the poor guy in this movie. What was more fun was telling friends the plot of this film. It didn't get many people to go see it, and probably cost the producers a few bucks. Bibi Besch had this film and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* out in the same year. You win some, you lose some. It's not a bad film, and the title was a winner after *Alien*, but it wasn't exactly memorable. You can get this film on DVD, but as of this writing, you can only get *The African Queen* on VHS. Message?"—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ronny Cox (Eli McCleary) Bibi Besch (Caroline McCleary); Paul Clemons (Michael McCleary); Don Gordon (Judge); R.G. Armstrong (Doc); Kitty Moffatt (Amanda Platt); L.Q. Jones (Sheriff Pool); Logan Ramsey (Ed Curwin); John Dennis Johnston (Horace Platt); Ron Soble (Tom Laws); Luke Askew (Dexter Ward); Meshach Taylor (Deputy Herbert); J. Boyce Holleman (Doc Odom); Natalie Nolan Howard (Court Clerk); Malcolm McMillin (Gas Station Attendant); Fred D. Meyers (Workman).

CREW: A Harvey Bernhard/Gabriel Katzka Production. *Special Makeup Effects Created and Designed by:* Thomas R. Burman. *Music:* Les Baxter. *Film Editors:* Robert Brown, Bert Louitt. *Production Designer:* David M. Haber. *Director of Photography:* Jack L. Richards. *Executive Producer:* Jack B. Bernstein. *Screen story and screenplay by:* Tom Holland. *Based on a Novel by:* Edward Levy. *Produced by:* Harvey Bernhard, Gabriel Katzka. *Casting:* Ramsay King and Associates. *Directed by:* Phillippe Mora. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the thick woods near Nioba, Mississippi in 1964, a lovely young wife, Caroline (Besch), is raped by a monster after the family car breaks down and her husband (Cox) goes seeking help. Seventeen years later, their growing son, Michael (Clemons) suffers from a chemical imbalance that could prove fatal, and his parents believe that the mystery of his illness goes back to the night of his conception in Nioba.

Michael breaks out of the hospital and follows his parents to the small Southern town, where strange compulsions drive him to savagely murder (and eat) Ed Curwin (Ramsay), the local newspaper editor. Michael falls in love with young Amanda Platt (Moffatt) but learns that he is transforming into a creature that hates the Platt family, and

is bound and determined to kill every one of them ... including Amanda. Michael tries to fight his transformation into the very soul that once raped his mother, but he cannot fight the beast within, nor the urges to reproduce and start the odd cycle of murder and monsters all over again.

COMMENTARY: It's difficult to know precisely what to make of *The Beast Within*, a strange horror movie concerning transformation, puberty and body image. *The Beast Within* also features plot elements of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in its depiction of a tragic young love between the children of warring clans in a Southern town.

Perhaps most bizarrely of all, *The Beast Within* involves a boy turning into a giant cicada monster, one with the genetic memory of his monstrous progenitor.



Forbidden love: Amanda (Kitty Moffat) and Michael (Paul Clemens) share a verboten kiss in *The Beast Within* (1981).

The transformation and puberty angle may be the best place to begin a review. Young Michael is sick from a chemical imbalance, from an out-of-control pituitary gland that was normal just a few months ago. In other words his ascent to manhood, his arrival at adolescence is the thing spurring his transformation, his "change." It's only natural, given puberty and sexual maturity, that much of *The Beast Within*

obsesses on the mystery of what Michael shall turn into. This is the question, after all, paramount to all intelligent adolescents: What kind of person will I be? What will I look like as a man? Will this acne ever go away? Yet Michael's voyage through puberty is fraught with concern and angst because of his uncertain parentage. What unknown genes may assert themselves?

As Michael transforms, growing into what he shall become, it's no accident that his tongue transforms into what looks suspiciously like a penis, and that a vagina-like slit opens up on his spine. These oddities symbolize the process of puberty, sexual maturity gone horribly awry. Since Michael's new features include elements of both the male and female anatomy, his transformation represents his parents' worst nightmare. They don't know who or what their son *really* is, since he is the fruit of rape. Interestingly, this angst is played out in terms of fears about sexual orientation ... will the boy be gay or straight? Will he put to use the penis tongue or the spinal vagina?

Parents must stand by, helpless, as children undergo changes during puberty. Growth spurts, body hair, nocturnal emissions, the menstrual cycle ... these are all things that are expected, but which a father and mother can do nothing about. The fear of adolescence and its after-effects is played out in some of *The Beast Within*'s final moments, which see the parents standing in a hospital room, agape, as their son transforms. His skin bubbles and pulsates (in some dated but elaborate effects), and a point is made. As parents, even though we do our best, we're helpless to keep our children from changing into adults.

Although Michael's parents do not know what the final result of the compromised adolescence will be, everything goes back to Michael's nature (not nurture), his very heritage. The genes of Michael's father ultimately assert themselves and—like father like son—Michael turns into a monster. This is a reflection of the fact that we're all the sum of our DNA, our genetic programming. In Michael's case, it is more severe, however. Encoded in his genes is the memory of his father, the programming to turn into a cicada monster after seventeen years, and pass the hideous legacy onto his own child.



The transformation of Michael (Clemens) begins in *The Beast Within*. Soon he'll be singing the song of a cicada.

Impressively, *The Beast Within* even finds a symbolic metaphor for Michael's journey, one that also happens to fit into his story. Time and time again, Michael experiences strange visions. To wit, he continues to see something trying to break through a fruit cellar door, something trying to break out and become free. This thing is not only a reference to a distinct and actual incident in the past (an event preceding his progenitor's attack), but a representative of his body's inner conflict. His genetic program is also trying to break out, to assert itself and become free.

Puberty, heritage, even star-crossed lovers? This review makes *The Beast Within* sound like a terrific, highly inventive, intellectual movie, no? Although all of this material is present, lurking just under the movie's exploitation surface, that doesn't change the fact that the film is not particularly good, nor scary. For instance, why the connection to a human/cicada-hybrid? I understand that the seventeen-year cycle provides an opening to bring in a boy entering adulthood, but really, who can take such a premise seriously? The fact that the cicada monster passes along not only its hideous, monstrous physiology, but also its blood feud with a particular family in a small Southern town? On which gene, pray tell, is that information encoded?

There are several moments in which the action just freezes and we

watch the special effects transformation of Michael. Now, these effects are passable, but by lingering on them, they appear less and less convincing. After a moment or two, it becomes painfully obvious that the effects are dependent on inflating and deflating bladders. The verisimilitude, the magic is consequently lost.

One might add that the depiction of the Southern town, down to the fake, exaggerated accents, is pure cornball. Also, the general unpleasantry of the opening rape scene involving Bibi Besch (which reveals her body being rocked back and forth as she is humped) makes the whole movie seem rather tasteless. At times, it's downright ludicrous.

The Beast Within spotlights some well-staged point-of-view stalking shots, a series of *The Shining*-inspired black-outs with card legends reading "The First Night," "The Second Night," and so on, but ultimately director Phillippe Mora doesn't have what it takes to make the film scary or even particularly stylish. He stages some remarkably gory sequences, including one with an embalming needle, but the whole cicada subplot just really ... bugs me.

Blood Link

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Moriarity (Dr. Craig Mannings/Keith Mannings); Penelope Milford (Julie Warren); Cameron Mitchell (Bud Waldo); Sarah Langenfeld (Christine); Martha Smith (Hedwig); Virginia McKenna (Woman in Ballroom); Reinhold K. Olszewski (Inspector Hessinger); Geraldine Fitzgerald (Mrs. Thomason); Henriette Gonnermann (Woman Tourist); Vonnie Sherman (Millie); Peter Manning (Bill); Alex Diakun (Dr. Adams); Peter Schlesinger (Stocky Man).

CREW: A Zadar Film Production. *Casting:* Lindsay Walker. *Music:* Ennio Morricone. *Film Editor:* Russel Lloyd. *Director of Photography:* Romano Albani. *Associate Producer:* Robert Gordon Edwards. *Original story by:* Max De Rita, Albert De Martino. *Screenplay:* Theodore Apstein. *Produced by:* Robert Palaggi. *Directed by:* Albert De Martino. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Craig Mannings (Moriarity) experiences nightmares in which he seems to be committing murder, and comes to suspect that

he is seeing through the eyes of his homicidal, separated Siamese twin, Keith (Moriarity), believed killed in a fire when they were seventeen.

Craig goes in search of his twin in Hamburg, Germany and finds that his brother is indeed a sadistic murderer who kills older women and who recently goaded a supposedly friendly sparring partner, Bud Waldo (Mitchell) to his grave. Waldo's daughter and Craig team up to catch Keith, but it is Keith who has the ultimate revenge, murdering Christine Waldo (Langenfeld) and framing Craig.

Craig is hard-pressed to prove his innocence since no one but Christine and a dead hooker have actually seen Keith, and his nefarious twin is already on record as being dead. Craig's compassionate girlfriend from America, Julie Warren (Milford) flies to Germany to set a trap for Keith, realizing that if Craig can see through Keith's eyes, the opposite must also be true. Julie puts everything on the line to meet Keith, a trauma she will not soon forget.

COMMENTARY: *Blood Link* is a kinky little horror thriller about the genetic ties which bind a pair of Siamese twins. The core conceit of this oddball, occasionally gripping movie is actually that old Corsican Brothers myth, that one Siamese twin can feel the pain of the other, and see through the other's eyes. *Blood Link* is augmented considerably by the presence of quirky Michael Moriarity, playing both the heroic Craig and his evil twin, Keith. Moriarity never comes at a role from the expected angle, and there's twice as much of him to enjoy in this movie.

So, are there significant differences between Siamese twins once separated and, if so, how would those differences be detected? *Blood Link* provides an interesting answer to that question. Keith, the evil brother, masquerades as Craig and proceeds to nonchalantly bed the daughter of Cameron Mitchell, the man he killed. Christine, his unknowing partner, doesn't realize who is inside her until it's too late to do anything about it. "Who's better?" Keith asks her during the act. Then, Keith proves impotent and kills his unfortunate lover. He decides to frames his brother.

Blood Link is definitely a perverse little movie, because the cure for Keith's persistent impotence turns out to be sleeping with Craig's other—and very patient—lover, his regular girlfriend, Julie. She willingly submits to his advances in the climax. "You don't have to rape me," she informs Keith. "You're going to let me make love to you?" He questions, sharing the audience's disbelief. "Yes," she replies simply,

and it's off to the races. Of course, Julie's just engaging in intercourse to save her boyfriend, and prove that Keith exists, but still, it's all kind of sleazy and kinky.

Adding to that feeling, several scenes also take place in a hotel room where Keith sleeps with a hooker. This movie is as much obsessed with sex as horror, but you know, that's okay. It distinguishes the film among the "twin movie" sweepstakes of the 1980s, which include *Basket Case* and *Dead Ringers*. Both of which are better films, but not nearly so lascivious.

The Boogens

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"The worst problem with *The Boogens* is that the monsters look ludicrous. Director James L. Conway manipulates the audience and delivers nerve-racking tension and fear. Screenwriter David O'Malley and Bob Hunt have created characters we care about: nice, attractive and caring people, most of whom are ripped apart."—Linda Gross, *The Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 1982, Calendar/Page 6.

"This dreary and unalluringly titled venture into the mining-jeopardy territory recently opened up by *My Bloody Valentine* makes that nondescript movie look like a masterpiece of imaginative horror. The emaciated plot is padded out with reams of inane repartee, much of it devoted to the egregious principals boasting about their sex lives."—Tim Pulleine, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1981, page 195.

"Halfway-decent monster flick, made in Utah snow country ... The monsters are only glimpsed briefly during the climactic chase through the abandoned mine shafts, a highlight of this lightweight but enjoyable low-budgeter."—John Stanley, *Revenge of the Creature Features Movie Guide*, Creatures at Large Press, 1988, page 35.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rebecca Balding (Trish Michaels); Fred McCarren (Mark Kinner); Annie Marie Marline (Jessica Ford); Jeff Harlan (Roger Lowry); John Crawford (Brian Deering); Med Flory (Dan Ostroff); Jon Lormer (Blanchard); Peg Stewart (Victoria Tusker); Scott Wilkinson (Deputy Greenwalt); Marcia Reider (Martha Chapman).

CREW: *Presented by:* Taft International Pictures. *Director of Photography:* Paul Hipp; *Production Designer:* Paul Staheli; *Film Editor:* Michael Spence; *Music Composed and Conducted by:* Bob Summers; *Story:* Tom Chapman, David O’Malley; *Screenplay:* David O’Malley, Bob Hunt; *Producer:* Charles E. Sielier, Jr.; *Boogen Designed and Made by:* William Munns, Ken Horn; *Casting:* Amy Schreiber and Associates; *Stunt Coordinator:* Greg Brickman; *Animal Trainer:* Karen Dew; *Director:* James L. Conway; *MPAA Rating:* R; *Running time:* 95 minutes.

P.O.V.

“I loved working with that dog. Usually the dogs survived [in movies but] we said, ‘We gotta kill the little fuck.’ It was really fun coming up with that. First of all, that was a great dog. The dog was trained beautifully by Karen Dew. I did a lot of complex shots where the dolly was involved, and the dolly would come up right in front of the dog. And we never had to wait for the dog!”—Director James L. Conway remembers working with the late, lamented Tiger, a victim of *The Boogens*.

“When we [Balding and McCarren] were doing the sex scene in front of the fireplace, the dog was supposed to jump out behind a table or something, and scare us. Well, the dog jumped out and ran flat over my face. The handler was so embarrassed, but it was very funny...”—Actress Rebecca Balding, adds her recollection of Tiger.

SYNOPSIS: Seventy years after a cave-in that allegedly killed thirty miners, the Silver City Mine in Colorado is re-opened by a four-man team from Syndicated Mines, Inc. Unfortunately, the deep mine hides a deadly secret: a race of subterranean, amphibious monsters that an old local calls the “Boogens.”

After a sealed passageway is re-opened, the beady-eyed Boogens are freed, and use a series of tunnels to terrorize points all around Silver City. In particular, miners Mark and Roger—and their girlfriends Trish and Jessica—face danger in their rented home because an underground tunnel leads up to their dark basement. Their brave miniature poodle, Tiger, tries to warn the young lovers of the encroaching danger, but the tentacled and murderous Boogens kill Roger and terrorizes the others.

When his friends are killed, Mark and Trish set out to seal the mine again, lest the terror continue. However they are trapped when their basement catches fire, and have no choice but to use the mining tunnels—infested with Boogens—as their escape route.

COMMENTARY: Some of the best horror movies star ludicrous monsters. Yet what makes these efforts succeed (and survive in the memory) is often a combination of attributes: a certain charm in the performances, a literate script, or even a director's aesthetic, his sense of visuals.

All three of these elements bolster the low-budget *The Boogens*. Still, what surfaces most strongly when considering the film—a fun little monster movie that deserves far more recognition and attention than it has received since its release more than two decades ago—is director James L. Conway's bag of cinematic tricks.

First and foremost, his camera is always fluid in the film, dodging and darting where necessary, and these movements (adopting the P.O.V. of the mine monster) create an overriding mood of tension. Conway is also especially adept at toying with audience expectations. Although the script features a number of familiar horror clichés, like the Cassandra-like Old Man, the plucky reporter, and “the hand on the shoulder” scare, how Conway plays each of these moments is not only commendable, but even—at times—inventive.

For instance, *The Boogens* squeezes much mileage, and has tremendous fun playing with, the canine star. That star is Tiger, the white poodle. This diminutive dog keeps getting into danger, and then getting saved at the absolute last moment. At one point, Tiger runs out into the snow and the audience is certain he's a goner. Later, he jumps out to scare the other cast members, and in one hair-raising moment Tiger is even chased by the Boogens through the kitchen and—again—it looks like it's curtains. But this dog has more lives than a cat, and that's a good thing, because the movie (and the director) have such fun toying with the character. In one delightful moment, the camera even goes in close for a reaction shot on Tiger during a tense scene, as though he were human. That dog is one well-trained critter, and—as silly as this praise may sound—his antics make the film an enjoyable romp.

It isn't just the dog's performance that makes the film interesting, it's the fact that director Conway is playing with many decades of dogs in movies. We're programmed to expect certain things when pets appear in horror flicks, and Conway teases us with our own awareness and knowledge of this.

In a pinch, Conway also utilizes imagery where he might have relied on dialogue instead, and that makes *The Boogens* a visual treat. The film opens with black-and-white stills from the 1890s–1900s depicting the Silver City Mine. These stills appear in the town newspaper, *The*

Silver Street Gazette, and they inform the audience of the mine's "backstory."

The "richest vein in history" is discovered. There's a silver strike in high country, hundreds rush to the mountains, then two cave-ins. These headlines tell a story as they continue: *Safety Inspector Due. Twenty-Seven Trapped in Mine! Miners Found Dead*, all leading up to the most important headline: *Mine Closed*. These visuals substitute for ham-handed exposition and nicely sets up the film's setting, a mine where something terrible lurks.

The setting (snowbound Utah) is itself beautiful and that fact gives the movie a little boost. *The Boogens* was made on the cheap but it's never obvious from the setting. Only the uninspired design (and execution) of the titular monster drags the movie down.

The floor-level low angle shots, later a staple on such programming as *The X-Files*, sell the illusion of a pursuing monster in better fashion than the visuals of the monster itself, and the director wisely keeps the whole creature off-screen as long as he can. For much of the film, all the audience sees of the monster are its slimy tentacles, which appear to have teeth. It's here that the movie is scariest, especially as the tentacles lash out, whip-like, to pull characters under cars, down stairs, and so forth. These scenes work and *The Boogens*, at times, generates awesome scares. Particularly absorbing are the frequent trips (with only flashlights as illumination) down to the basement, where the monster lurks.

The film's performances are also charming, augmented by a script that focuses on the fact that the young men are pretty sex-obsessed. Lines such as "Tomorrow's the anniversary of your first orgasm" are silly in a knowing fashion, as though the movie is artfully checking off a list of components. Breast part of the movie? Check. An Old Man Cassandra? Check. Horny young people? Check? Gory death scenes where tentacles cut upon necks and other body parts? Check, check and check.

Maybe the nicest thing about *The Boogens* is that there's an attitude of *joie de vivre* about the film. It never tries to be anything other than a modern monster movie, and on those grounds it succeeds far beyond expectations.

CLOSE-UP: Unearthing the Boogens: *The Boogens* is an early 1980s treasure, and one long overdue for a rediscovery. James L. Conway, director of such efforts as *Hangar 18* (1980) and many Sunn Classics

films, as well as several episodes of various generations of *Star Trek*, recollects that before *The Boogens*, he had always wanted to make a horror movie.

“When I was a kid, my first ten years growing up were in New York, and there was *Million Dollar Movie* and there was the Halloween all-night-long marathons. Same thing when I moved to Chicago. In L.A. it was Elvira. So I was a big fan of horror movies. I had all the model kits with Dracula and Frankenstein, and I have the newer versions at my home. I just always loved horror movies, so this was my first chance to really do one.”

At the time, he was still working for Sunn Classics, an outfit in Utah. “We had done a couple of scary things,” he explains. “We’d done a movie of the week, an Edgar Allan Poe piece—*The Fall of the House of Usher*—which wasn’t one of my best efforts. But it was fun to make. So this was a chance for the company, in a corporate sense, because we wanted to make a big impact with a horror movie that people could relate to, and give the company a different [image]. And the other side was that it was a labor of love because I really wanted to make a horror picture. I thought this was a unique idea and it could be really creepy. We spent a lot of time trying to figure out how much blood, how much guts, how much nudity, how much language. We wanted to get an R. We thought that horror movies had done best with an R. The key was always trying to get the humor in there, try to get the love story in there, try to have a lot of scares and try to make it bloody.”

However, even getting the right cast was not necessarily an easy task. “We cast it for two different age brackets,” Conway reveals. “A lot of horror movies involve teens: 19-, 20-year-olds, and then those that are older. We actually auditioned two casts, both twenty-year-olds and twenty-eight-year olds. We ended up going with the older cast, because we felt the actors were better. I think nowadays, most horror movies are made with 20-year-olds as opposed to the 30-year-olds.”

As it turned out, this casting choice proved quite a good decision because he ended up falling head over heels in love with the film’s final girl, played by Rebecca Balding.

“Rebecca Balding, I married,” Conway explains. “We met on that movie. She came in to audition, we chatted, she read and she left, and I turned to the associate producer and I said, ‘I could marry that girl.’ Somehow, she got cast. So Wednesday the first week of shooting, we went out. That Saturday she proposed. And four weeks later—while we were still shooting—we got married. And she was living with a guy

at the time! And this coming February, we're having our twenty-fifth anniversary."

Once the cast was selected, Conway's crew filmed from January through March 1981 in Park City, Utah. Where it just happened to be freezing. "There are a lot of night exterior shots, especially out in front of the house," Conway details. "It was 20 below zero. And we shot for two straight weeks at 20 below zero. If you listen to the soundtrack, you can hear these footsteps crunching on the snow. That's real."

One difficulty of the shoot involved the titular Boogens. "That was the stupidest-looking monster in the whole world," says Balding. "To see it, it just kind of looks like a lobster and a cockroach. It wasn't automated or anything like that. We're talking very low-tech here."

"So we had the model guy come in to do the Boogens creature," Conway elaborates. "I wish I could make it again now, because you can get such better things. But we looked at it [the monster] ... and it was horrible. I mean, it would not stand up on screen. Which is why you barely see it for most of the movie."

"I always planned to do the point of views, but as it turned out, I used them more than I thought I would have, because that was a creature you could use in three or four frames but not get a lot of it. It was very primitive. Today we use completely articulated creatures, and you have three or four people manipulating them. So you get real movement in the skin and the eyes, and the breathing and all that. This was very primitive by those standards. There was somebody with a stick pushing it around, and I think the arms articulated out and did something. It wasn't in a full-out way that you could actually have them look good. If you just looked at it lying there, it looked pretty stupid."

Another problem didn't involve monster prosthetics, but nudity. Specifically, some actors decided they didn't want to reveal skin on camera.

"In the contract, nudity was specifically required, but then we got up there. Rebecca didn't have a problem, but at the last minute, Annie Marie [Marline] did," Conway explains.

"All those actors signed contracts, then got up there and held a meeting and said they weren't going to do any nudity," Balding further explains. "They wanted me to do that too, but I said no. I wouldn't feel right doing that. I wasn't going to go back on my word."

“So there was a big problem with the agent and there were telephone calls and we’d already shot her [Marline],” Conway says. “Again, in these kinds of movies it’s very important to have nudity ... that’s what the audience expected. I love Ann Marie—she’s a wonderful gal—so we talked about it and she ended up doing a shower scene, and I protected her so there was no nudity.

“And there was also supposed to be a lot of nudity when she was killed. She was supposed to have her towel ripped off, and have slashes across her body and you would have seen her breasts and such. But that had to be changed. It was pretty traumatic at the time, because this was something very important to everyone at the studio, and suddenly the co-star of the picture says she’s not going to do it. Ideally, you want to have things the way they’re agreed to, and that didn’t happen.”

Balding remembers that her nude scenes were fine, but that they came a little early in the shoot for her taste. “The first day we shot that butt shot that happens when I hear screams or something, and I have a towel in front and turn around so I’m flashing in both directions. Now, the first day of shooting? That’s a little uncomfortable. But we’d gotten there a week before, so we had a lot of fun.”

But none of these moments compare with the event that dominated the shoot.

“We went two weeks over schedule because Jamie burned the set down!” Balding laughs.

Conway recalls that this scary incident commenced with a giant indoor set (in a grocery store) that had been converted to represent the film’s interior mine settings.

“We had built a very complex set on an abandoned grocery store, where all of the caves were, and the big underground lake was. That was a set. Towards the end of the production in this grocery store, we were filming a scene where they survivors crawl out of the house, and there’s a plume of fire that comes in and hits the side of the cave wall. When we shot it, we put the fire out, but it suddenly erupted somewhere else, and spread. We got everybody out of there, and the building burned down in about ten minutes. It was horrifying.

“Later,” Conway continues, “we found out that the material they used to make the cave walls, which was generally used in those days, was a hazard. It’s been since banned. Luckily nobody was hurt.”

But the crew was left with a problem. The scenes in the cave weren't completed, and now the set was destroyed.

"We had to finish the movie inside a real mine. We shot in Park City, which was a silver mine in those days. So we went in for the last two weeks, and we would go in [the mine] about a mile on the train, and shoot inside the real cave. It was a mile in, not a mile down."

"It was a lot colder than you'd think," Balding recollects of being deep inside the real mine. "It's a steady temperature, but it just gets bone-chilling, because it's damp. We'd set up the chairs in a green room-type area, and I forget who it was, but somebody said 'What's this?' and found blasting caps under the director's chair."

"We had to take a class in self-rescuers too," she explains. "And we were supposed to wear goggles and hard hats and put on the breathing units every time we weren't working."

"A normal day is twelve to fourteen hours, but one of the actors who was in the movie had another job coming up, so we had to finish it by a certain date," Conway describes, "and the only way to do that was to finish our last day as a 24-hour day. So we were in that cave for twenty-four or twenty-five hours shooting."

Today, however, what Conway remembers spending the most time on were the assault sequences. "All the attack sequences—you have to make sure they are as scary as possible. It's very easy to go overboard and have too much blood; and it's also easy to make them not scary and make them hokey. I was afraid the monster would come across as hokey. With what we had, I think we pulled it off pretty well. It was a very low-budget movie by most standards. I think we did it for between 600,000 and a million dollars. It would be kind of fun to do it again."

"One of the scariest moments," Balding adds, "was when Jeff went out to get the car and the Boogens pulled him underneath it. The way Jamie used the monster's point of view was also great."

"*The Boogens* received lovely reviews and horrible reviews, depending on who reviewed it," Conway recollects. "Some of the critics just didn't get it. Some of the critics understood immediately what it was supposed to be. It had no ambitions beyond what it was: It was a scary little movie."

"Somehow, there are movies of the same period that come up much more often. It's sort of in the second or third tier of horror movies

when you first think of horror movies of the 1980s. Part of that was the distribution problems. It had sporadic distribution. It wasn't like these days, when you release across the whole country all at once. You sort of spread out over three or four months, so I think it lost a little bit of the awareness that it could have had under other circumstances.

"I looked at it not too long ago. It was on one of the cable channels. The print was much better than the prints I have. I thought the scary sequences were quite good. There's one where Rebecca goes down the stairs and you get the P.O.V. camera moving around, and the dog jumps out. I thought those moments were quite good."

The Burning

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"A slavish imitation of the already slaving *Friday the 13th*, hardly bothering even to refurbish the plot ... Presented Disney-fashion as a towering, barely glimpsed silhouette, in lighting that bears no relation to prevailing atmospheric conditions, [the killer] seems to be playing in an entirely different movie from the one inhabited by his victims."—Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1981, page 241.

"*The Burning*'s cast members do a fair job of screaming their way through the basically witless story, which probably will only appeal to those who are willing to turn over the price of admission for 90 minutes of gory mayhem and not much else."—Bill Kaufman, *Newsday*, November 5, 1982, Part 2/page 11.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brian Matthews (Todd); Leah Ayres (Michelle); Brian Backer (Alfred); Larry Joshua (Glazer); Jason Alexander (David); Ned Eisenberg (Eddie); Carrick Glenn (Sally); Carolyn Houlihan (Karen); Fisher Stevens (Woodstock); Lou David (Cropsy); Shelly Bruce (Tiger); Sarah Chodoff (Barbara); Bonnie Deroski (Marnie); Holly Hunter (Sophie); Kevi Kendall (Diane); J.R. McKechnie (Fish); George Parry (Alan); Anne Segull (Rhoda); Jeff Der Hart (Supervisor); Bruce Kluger (Rod); Keith Mandell (Young Todd); Jerry McGee (Intern); Mansoor Najee-Ullah (Orderly); Willie Reale (Paul); John Roach (Snoop); K.C. Townsend (Hooker); John Trippi (Camp Counselor); James Van Verth (Jamie).

CREW: Jean Ubaud Michael Gohl, Corky Burger present a Miramax Production. *Casting:* Joy Todd. *Art Director:* Peter Politanoff. *Production Associate:* Keith Cavele. *Production Consultant:* Brad Grey. *Associate Producer:* Dany Ubaud. *Production Supervisor:* Drummond Challis. *Film Editor:* Jack Sholder. *Director of Photography:* Harvey Harrison. *Music:* Rick Wakeman. *Musical Director:* Alan Brawer. *Bluegrass Music:* Alan Brawer. *Music in Girls' Bunk written by:* Anna Pepper. *Special Makeup and Special Effects by:* Tom Savini. *Horror Sequence Designed by:* Tom Savini. *Editorial Consultant:* Bob Weinstein. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Corky Burger. *Executive Producers:* Jean Ubaud, Michael Gohl, Andre Djaoui. *Original Story by:* Harvey Weinstein, Tony Maylam, Brad Grey. *Screenplay:* Peter Lawrence, Bob Weinstein. *Created and Produced by:* Harvey Weinstein. *Directed by:* Tom Maylam. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Camp Blackfoot, a group of teens plays a practical joke on their surly caretaker, Cropsy (David). It goes horribly wrong when he is burned across his whole body.

Five years later, a vengeful Cropsy is released from St. Catherine's Hospital and makes for Camp Stonewater after murdering a prostitute. Once there he pursues a group of teens on their canoe trip deep into the woods, to Devil's Creek, and begins to murder them with gardening shears, starting with Karen (Houlihan). Before long the head counselors, Todd (Matthews) and Michelle (Ayres) realize what they are up against and set out for help, but Cropsy has released all their canoes into the lake, forcing them to build a raft. Sally (Glenn) and her boyfriend, the bully Glazer (Joshua) are also murdered in the woods, and the nerdish Alfred (Backer) sounds the alarm. Michelle gets the surviving kids onto the raft and contacts the police. Todd stays behind to help Alfred, but finds that he is lured into a trap set especially for him by the mad Cropsy.

COMMENTARY: The slasher film paradigm returns with a vengeance in *The Burning*, a solid if formulaic entry which bears the distinction of featuring many future Hollywood stars, including *Raising Arizona's* (1987) Holly Hunter, *Seinfeld's* Jason Alexander, and Fisher Stevens. (The only other low-budget slasher film that can lay claim to more future celebrities is probably *The Final Terror* (1980), perhaps a more "mountain man" picture. It includes Joe Pantaliano, Daryl Hannah, Adrian Zmed and Rachel Ward.)

Other than highlighting several impressive young talents, however, *The Burning* is a fairly rote—though not entirely ineffective—selection in the overpopulated slasher sweepstakes.

A practical joke against a nasty drunkard named Cropsy serves as the transgression which must be punished. This crime—a burning, naturally—is depicted in the deadly preamble. The organizing principle is, for seemingly the thousandth time, a summer camp. Distinguishing itself from *Friday the 13th* and *Friday the 13th Part II*, this is a summer camp that actually appears populated by kids, rather than merely in preparations to be populated (*Friday the 13th*) or populated entirely with counselors in training (*Friday Part II*).

The summer camp provides locations such as a wooded, isolated island where Cropsy attacks, and props such as canoes, oars and the like. Naturally, this setting also provides the victim base: young teens who wish to engage in hot sex and smoke weed. Honestly, watching *The Burning* a viewer could experience a strange sense of *deja vu*. It's all material that's been vetted before, and often more effectively.

Cropsy is the uniformed killer, a man who appears in hat, mask and trenchcoat to hide his burned flesh. His weapon is garden shears, appropriate given that his name incorporates the word *crop*, meaning to “to cut off” or “cut very short.” *Crop* also means to “reap” or “harvest,” and Cropsy’s victims are certainly reaping the unfortunate harvest of their antisocial criminal behavior from the past.

Sit down with *The Burning* and bring along a notepad, because you’ll need one to check off all the elements of the slasher formula it marshals. There’s the Boy Who Cried Wolf, or Cassandra Figure, here named Alfred. Naturally, nobody believes his tales about Cropsy. There’s the campfire exposition scene (a sequence dramatized in eighties horrors from *The Fog* [1980] and *Friday the 13th Part II* [1981] to *Madman* [1982]). There’s even the “vice precedes slice and dice” equation, meaning that characters engage in sex (and surprisingly, full frontal nudity) before dying. The film’s final girl isn’t much of a challenge to Cropsy, and she’s not even really a crucial part of Cropsy’s overall revenge strategy. He’s out to kill Todd, so *The Burning* is one slasher in which the hero is male, not female.

The Burning trots out that old favorite, the point-of-view stalk shot. The film updates this subjective camera to include slow-motion photography. Also, in the tradition of *Psycho*, the film includes a shower scene.

The Burning might make one meditate on the popularity of the slasher formula in the 1980s, and begin to wonder if these films found such resonance because—in many ways—Americans no longer faced danger on a daily basis by the heyday of Reagan. Faceless avenging

slasher may just be the inevitable result of a society that boasts fewer natural predators, where people live in orderly communities protected by police and separated from the vicissitudes of fickle Mother Nature. Killers like Cropsy or Jason are forces of nature in and of themselves, and perhaps they're Mother Nature's way of thinning the human herd.

Such an assessment is relative, of course, given the often-narrow parameter of quality among 1980s slasher films, but *The Burning* is not half-bad. It isn't surprising or particularly inventive, but the young characters are better drawn than in some of the later *Friday the 13th* movies, and not played so broadly, or for comedic purposes. These campers are not blithering idiots, and one enjoys seeing them work together to mount a defense against Cropsy.

It's also worth mentioning how *The Burning* doesn't idealize the teen sexual experience. The sex scene in the woods between Sally and Glaser ends in the shame of premature ejaculation. The intercourse is groping, fast and obviously not very good, and one must imagine how fifteen-year-old audience members (who perhaps hadn't experienced sex when they first saw the film) would respond to such an unappealing depiction.

Additionally, the scene wherein Cropsy takes out a raft full of screaming kids with his garden shears in a series of bloody shock cuts is visually stunning and perfectly executed. Occasionally the screen fades out to red during an especially gruesome incident, and that's another novel touch, though one that is reminiscent, perhaps, of the ending of Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

Cat People

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“...an intriguing, ambitious film ... a worthy companion to its 1942 predecessor.”—Don Kilbourne, *Magill’s Cinema Annual 1983: A Survey of 1982 Films*, Salem Press, page 103.

“Paul Schrader has attempted to upgrade the genre in *Cat People* and nothing works. The sexuality that used to be implicit he makes explicit, eliminating its sense of mystery. The film has no momentum, no pace, only predictability. Schrader even mishandles Nastassia Kinski—the furtive manner that made her so convincing a Victorian heroine in *Tess* and which here might easily suggest feline grace

becomes merely listless.”—Howard Kissel, *Women’s Wear Daily*, April 1, 1982, page 20.

“... Schrader acknowledges that human sexuality is a powerful force—because it is savage as well as soothing. By expressing his vision through the genre of the horror film, Schrader is able to depict both the awe and sense of dread with which he continues to view eroticism. Schrader is a film magician who makes the supernatural believable.”—James M. Wall, *Christian Century*, May 5, 1982, page 547.

“Nastassia Kinski is very thin. David Bowie came out with a pretty good song. Malcolm McDowell was ... odd. Alan Ormsby shouldn’t play with old movies. It was better in black-and-white.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

“An erotically-charged movie that is more suspenseful than terrifying. Malcolm McDowell does a great turn as Nastassia Kinski’s brother, but it is Kinski who makes the audience purr in this one. Nice little bondage scene to boot.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nastassia Kinski (Irene Gallier); Malcolm McDowell (Paul Gallier); John Heard (Oliver Yates); Annette O’Toole (Alice Perrin); Ruby Dee (Female); Ed Begley Jr. (Joe Creigh); Scott Paulin (Bill Searle); Frankie Faison (Detective Brandt); Ron Diamond (Det. Ron Diamond); Lynn Lowry (Ruthie); John Larroquette (Bronte Judson); Tessa Richards (Billie); Patricia Perkins (Taxi Driver); Berry Berenson (Sandra); Fausto Barajas (Otis); John H. Fields (Masage Parlor Manager); Emery Hallier (Yeatman Brewer); Stephen Marshal (Moonie); Julie Denney (Carol); Francine Segal (Church Woman); Don Hood (Train Station Agent).

CREW: RKO Pictures and Universal Pictures present a Charles Fries Production, a Film by Paul Schrader. *Special Visual Effects by:* Albert Whitlock. *Visual Consultant:* Ferdinando Scarfiotti. *Theme from Cat People, lyrics written and performed by:* David Bowie. *Music:* Giorgio Moroder. *Film Editor:* Jacqueline Cambas. *Supervising Film Editor:* Bud Smith. *Art Director:* Edward Richardson. *Director of Photography:* John Bailey. *Executive Producer:* Jerry Bruckheimer. *Story by:* De Witt Bodeen. *Screenplay by:* Alan Ormsby. *Produced by:* Charles Fries. *Special Makeup Effects designed and created by:* Tom Burman. *Animal Artifacts created by:* Ellis Burman, Bob Williams, Allan Hall. *Animal Coordinator:* Ron Oxley. *Animal Trainers:* Steve Martin, Mark Weiner.

Catvision Optical Effects by: Robert Blalack. *Casting by:* Mary Goldberg. *Matte Artist:* Syd Dutton. *Stunt Coordinator:* Walter Scott. *Directed by:* Paul Schrader. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In New Orleans, the beautiful Irene (Kinski) becomes acquainted with her estranged brother Paul (McDowell), from whom she has been separated for years and barely remembers. On her first night in town, Paul spies on her while she sleeps; then, as he is visiting a hooker, he transforms into a black leopard. Animal control, led by Alice Perrin (O'Toole) and Oliver Yates (Heard), wrangles the animal and brings it back to the zoo, which Irene just happens to visit while touring the city.

After murdering one of the zoo workers (Begley Jr.) by ripping off his arm, Paul transforms back into a human and leaves the zoo. He then tells Irene of their strange heritage: They are the offspring of cats and humans. Worse, when they achieve orgasm during intercourse, they are doomed to transform into the leopards, and cannot return to human shape until they have taken a life. Paul wants Irene to be his spouse, but Irene spurns him, having fallen in love with Oliver. Paul is killed in a bloody confrontation, but Irene must now confront the animal within herself. Can she make love to Oliver and retain her humanity, and if she does transform into an animal, will she kill to be human again?

COMMENTARY: Unlike the scenario depicted in Jacques Tourneur's stunning black-and-white mood piece *Cat People* (1942), in the Paul Schrader remake from 1982 it takes much more than a kiss to turn a woman into a "monstrous fang-and-claw killer." In keeping with a more free cinema in the 1980s, transformation occurs at the moment of an orgasm, not a kiss. Sign of the times, I guess.

Cat People opens with some outré imagery (accompanied by an off-beat David Bowie theme song). The film reveals a prehistoric landscape of wind-blown human skulls and crimson sand. In this prehistoric wasteland comes a black panther, standing on rocks beneath a wild-looking tree. Behind the big cat, the sky is a deep, rich apricot. Then a human woman is given to the cat as a sacrifice. She is tied to a tree and the cat approaches her. Its intent quickly becomes clear and it prepares to mate with her. Its rears up on its hind legs, reaching for her face...



Good night, Irene. Nastassja Kinski strikes a seductive pose in Paul Schrader's *Cat People* (1982).

Yep, it's pretty weird stuff and not at all in keeping with the psychological, tell-but-don't-show aesthetic of Tourneur. Many admirers of the 1942 film complain about this *Cat People*'s decision to graphically depict both sex and violence (and also definitively reveal Irene's true nature early in the proceedings). However, what fun is a remake if it is exactly the same movie as the original? The same critics who cry about unfaithful remakes would be the first ones, most likely, to carp at movies that feel too slavish. The world already has one subtle, atmospheric *Cat People* so Schrader gives audiences an erotic, sexual one. What's the harm?

Still, Schrader might have wanted to steer clear of the first film's signature moments, such as the scene set at a swimming pool, which so effortlessly created an aura of horror. The same moment is vetted in color to lesser ends here. Somehow, the moment just doesn't feel as ominous in glorious color and with Schrader's framing. Better probably, to accent other moments.

In fairness, he does. In one striking and vivid scene, an angry cat (McDowell's character in feline form) rips off Ed Begley Jr.'s arm, exposing white bone. Blood spills out everywhere on the zoo's white floor (and on Irene's white shoes, too) and it's gooey and disgusting. But effective.

Schrader's *Cat People* cooks on a long, slow temperature as Oliver and Irene burn for each other and dance around their desire. If Irene makes love she will transform into a killer. This is the fear of the repressed, that sexuality expressed will turn one craven, monstrous ... animalistic. It's on this territory that the new *Cat People* works best.

When Irene—a sinewy, prowling Nastassja Kinski—seduces Oliver she strips a little at a time, going topless. They have intercourse and she doesn't change immediately afterwards. Instead, she goes to the bathroom and fingers her broken hymen and smells her bloody digits. There's something raw, animalistic, wild and sensual in these actions, and sure enough, the cat claws soon come out as Irene transforms. But Irene doesn't kill Oliver; eventually she trains herself—even in feline form—not to kill her lover. So perhaps this resolution is the film's way of indicating that Irene's repression is gone, and she can at last enjoy sex, carefree. Or, alternately, that man has dominated the beast, and rendered the cat woman domestic. At the end of the film, after all, Irene's living in a zoo.

This *Cat People* isn't particularly scary, and the film loses momentum when McDowell's character is killed. But the odd subject matter, the

dreamy Kinski performance, and the trademark eighties electronic score grant the film an enhanced feeling of pensive mistiness. It's a vague and hazy mood that this *Cat People* establishes, not unlike a cat lounging lazily in the afternoon sunshine. Maybe that's the right note to strike, but this film isn't quite the classic that the original was.

Still, the 1980s was the age of the horror remake (others include *The Thing* [1982], *The Fly* [1986] and *Invaders from Mars* [1986]). *Cat People*'s re-boot is imaginative, sensual and kinky enough to deserve a second glance.

Creepshow

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Although *Creepshow* has no sociological perspective, it's at least a respite from the post-*Psycho* vision of horror as something to be inscribed on the bodies of nubile women. Rather than cutting up girls, the film is faithful to the E.C. tendency to locate horror within the confines of the nuclear family..."—J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, November 23, 1982, page 62.

"For what this film is, a movie version of a Stephen King take on an old EC-style comic, it's in an odd place. It's not Romero's most notable film, not the most notable Stephen King-related film, it's probably not as good as the old British horror anthologies like *Tales from the Crypt* and *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors*, but it's still enjoyable. The E.G. Marshall vs. cockroaches story is absolutely classic, and Marshall chews up the white antiseptic scenery with great relish, quite a stretch for a guy who only one year before was kneeling before Zod. The other stories aren't quite as satisfying (except maybe Fritz Weaver, Hal Holbrook, and Adrienne Barbeau vs. the thing under the stairs—who couldn't enjoy that?). But for what it is, this is a fun film. Romero's not really known for his fun films (although his *Dead* films generally have lots of humor in them). In some ways, this film signaled the beginning of Hollywood's flirtation with George A. Romero. It's very polished, it has a score that was composed for the film (which might be a Romero first) and a pretty snazzy one at that, and it doesn't quite feel like it was made by the guy who'd made *Dawn of the Dead*. *Knightriders*, Romero's next film, lashed out at the crass way the media deals with fame, and one wonders if something during *Creepshow* wasn't sitting right with G.A.R. This is one of Romero's only films

without a message, and he seems uncomfortable with that. *Two Evil Eyes*, a later Romero–Dario Argento collaboration, has the same kind of listless direction. The years will probably be kind to this film, however, and it makes one wonder how people will see it in a future where the EC comics might be entirely forgotten.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“Romero and King get to romp around in a comic-book anthology. King really should have reined in his bumpkin farmer act, but at least he looked like he was having fun. Nothing really spectacular here, and nothing that rises above the mediocre horror anthology TV shows of the period.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST

Prologue: Cletus Anderson (Host); Joe King (Billy); Tom Atkins (Billy’s Father); Tom Savini, Marty Schiff (Garbage Men).

“Father’s Day”: Carrie Nye (Sylvia Grantham); Viveca Lindfors (Aunt Bedelia); Ed Harris (Hank Blaine); Warner Shook (Richard Grantham); Jon Lormer (Nathan Grantham); John Amplas (Nathan’s Corpse).

“The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill”: Stephen King (Jordy Verrill); Bingo O’Malley (Jordy’s Dad & Cameos).

“Something to Tide You Over”: Leslie Nielsen (Richard Vickers); Ted Danson (Harry Wentworth); Gaylen Ross (Becky Vickers).

“The Crate”: Hal Holbrook (Henry Northrup); Adrienne Barbeau (Wilma Northrup); Fritz Weaver (Dexter Stanley); Christine Forrest (Tabitha Raymond).

“They’re Creeping Up on You”: E.G. Marshall (Upston Pratt); Don Keefer (Mike the Janitor).

CREW: United Film Distribution Presents a Laurel Production of a George A. Romero Film. *Costume Design:* Barbara Anderson. *Original Music:* John Harrison. *Film Editors:* Pasquale Buba, Paul Hirsch, George A. Romero, Michael Spolan. *Production Design/Scene Special Effects:* Cletus Anderson. *Makeup Special Effects:* Tom Savini. *Associate Producer:* David E. Vogel. *Director of Photography:* Michael Gornick. *Executive Producer:* Salah M. Hassanein. *Original Screenplay:* Stephen King. *Producer:* Richard R. Rubinstein. *Comic Book Art:* Jack Kamen. *Executive Producers:* Salah M. Hassanein, David E. Vogel. *Directed by:*

George A. Romero. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Billy (King) is a horror comic collector, but his dad (Atkins) thinks that horror is “crap” and throws away his son’s latest issue of the magazine *Creepshow*. At the window, *Creepshow*’s host—a ghoul—spies Billy and then introduces five tales of horror.

“Father’s Day” concerns the resurrection of a nasty old man Grantham (Shook). He wreaks vengeance upon the woman who killed him, Bedelia (Lindfors), and her family.

In “The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill,” a simpleton farmer (Stephen King) happens upon a meteor, cracks it open and is infected with a kind of green alien weed that won’t stop growing.

“Something to Tide You Over” revolves around a control freak named Richard Vickers (Nielsen) and the evil fate he has planned for his unfaithful wife (Ross) and her lover, Harry (Danson). Unfortunately for Vickers, the tables are turned and he too suffers a horrible fate.

In “The Crate,” a meek college professor (Holbrook) schemes to get rid of his shrewish wife Wilma (Barbeau) by feeding her to a monster that’s been hidden in a crate in a laboratory basement for over a century.

In the last tale, “They’re Creeping Up on You,” a callous and obsessive-compulsive business tycoon, Pratt (Marshall) sees his futuristic, sterile white apartment overrun by an army of cockroaches.

After the last of these macabre tales, Billy executes a voodoo-doll-style revenge against his father.

COMMENTARY: *Creepshow* is a ghoulish good time but nothing that’s going to keep one awake at night. Director George Romero and best-selling novelist Stephen King team up to craft a horror anthology tribute to the great EC Comic tradition of yesterday, which includes such titles as *Vault of Horror* and *Tales from the Crypt*. The film boasts five separate (and unconnected) stories and runs a lengthy two hours, when probably three or four stories would have gotten the same job done with a degree of brevity, the soul of wit. Also, three good installments would have granted the impression of a stronger film, not merely a faster one. As it stands, at least two of the entries in *Creepshow* are no better than mediocre.

Perhaps the most interesting element is Romero’s attempt to ape a comic-book panel style. Romero is a great director, but his visual style

is blunt. It's fair to state he's more skilled in the arts of editing and writing than artistic composition, so he may not be the perfect fit for this movie, despite his obvious affection for the material. Some of Romero's comic book touches include garish lighting (and light transitions) to make it look like the characters inhabit a two-dimensional world, and optical superimposition of things like green slime. Also, each story opens and closes with comic-to-image and image-to-comic panel change.

This is something that moral watchdogs of the 1950s never understood but the E.C. aesthetic is highly moral. When someone commits a crime in *Tales from the Crypt*, he pays for it; the cosmic scales of justice are righted. Characters who are immoral or do bad things get their just deserts, and that's the underlying thrust of *Creepshow*. When man's law won't do, there's supernatural law to balance things. Call it genre karma, it's the very thing EC excelled in dishing out.

"Father's Day" is—of course—literally a just deserts story, since it involves a corpse returning in search of his birthday cake. All his surviving relatives are nasty, selfish people, so the old man's got some violence and death to deal out like party favors. This is a weak, short entry that feels so rudimentary, it almost seems half-complete. The punchline is that Daddy decapitates Bedelia and serves her up as his birthday cake.

Creepshow's second story is so piss-poor it almost brings the movie to a grinding halt. "The Lonesome Death of Jordy Verrill" stars Stephen King himself as a farmer (a vocation he apparently equates with idiot) who is infected by the "green shit" coming off a meteor that's crashed on his property. This green mossy substance attaches itself to everything, which is a creepy idea reminiscent of *The Blob*, and Jordy tries everything to free himself from the growth. Unfortunately, he also tries water, which merely accelerates the growth process. The end of the story finds him blowing his brains out with a shotgun. One has to wonder what the hell this story is doing in the movie. Unlike the other stories, Verrill has not really done anything wrong or nasty that requires him to be punished in such a violent, lonely fashion. His only sin is that he's stupid, and that hardly seems like a capital offense. I love King, so I don't want to attack his goofy performance, but let me state this: He's a better director (see *Maximum Overdrive* [1986]) than he is an actor.

Fortunately, *Creepshow* starts to pick up with its third story, which finds evil Leslie Nielsen punishing his adulterous wife and her lover.

In “Something to Tide You Over,” he traps the betrayers on a private beach and buries them up to their necks in the sand as the tide starts to roll in. He tells them to hold their breaths as the ocean starts to splash against their faces and for the first time in the film, *Creepshow* successfully exploits a palpable, universal fear: the fear of drowning/ being buried alive. The two lovers have no opportunity to escape, no leverage because they can’t move their arms, and the occasional crab happens by just to make their deaths that much more miserable. The just deserts angle comes in when the lovers return from the grave as zombies and decide to let Nielsen’s character have a taste of his own medicine.



The Creep has a story to tell. The host of *Creepshow* (1982) waits outside your window...

Better yet is story number four, “The Crate,” which finds a timid professor, played by Hal Holbrook, vexed by his shrewish alcoholic wife, Adrienne Barbeau. When a crate containing a monster is found at the university, Holbrook’s character realizes he’s got the perfect meal for it. This entry works because Barbeau plays such an exaggerated, monstrous character, and because the creature itself is a marvel: all teeth and hair. It’s genuinely frightening, and the scene in which it kills a student, ripping him apart, is well-done.

Finally, *Creepshow* goes on out a bang with a story guaranteed to make your skin crawl. It’s a one man *tour de force* starring E.G. Marshall, entitled “They’re Creeping Up on You.” Marshall plays a character who is one part Ebenezer Scrooge (in his cruelty to his employees), and one part Howard Hughes (in his obsessive compulsive drive to eliminate germs). Multi-millionaire Upston Pratt is a racist, nasty character who is gleeful when a business competitor commits suicide and who, he likes to claim, squashes enemies like cockroaches. He lives for \$3,200 a month in his germ-free penthouse. Even there, he wears latex gloves. When Pratt’s cruelty goes too far, cosmic justice is meted by about a zillion cockroaches, which swarm over his apartment.

“They’re Creeping Up on You,” which contrasts the immaculate white apartment with swarming cockroaches, is so disgusting, so over-the-top that even entomologists will cringe as roaches fill the kitchen sink, climb in bed, get in the food and eventually eat out Pratt’s body. This is the perfect capper for *Creepshow*, because it really and truly generates creeps.

Creepshow is a mixed bag that starts poorly and ends strong.

Evilspeak

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“*Evilspeak* has been made painstakingly by people who know exactly what they’re doing. It becomes grisly, to be sure, but not offensively so because it doesn’t take itself seriously. You can, if you wish, take *Evilspeak* as an indictment of military academic life, and in its spoofy, throwaway manner, it’s arguably more effective—and infinitely less heavy-handed—than *Taps*.”—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*,

January 14, 1982, Calendar, page 7.

"It may well be that *Evilspeak* is the most imaginatively awful picture of the year."—Archer Winsten, *New York Post*, February 27, 1982, page 9.

"[A] passable variation on De Palma's 1976 chiller, *Carrie* ... Weston makes the most of a moody cobweb-thick set ... The director also has a sense of humor ... The bitter tension builds nicely."—*People Weekly*, April 15, 1982, page 29.

"Clint Howard shows a remarkable amount of talent in his roles, and this is unfortunately one of the few opportunities he's had to be the star of a story (without a big bear hogging the camera). Watched now, the computer angles of the story seem fairly dopey, and in many ways, *Evilspeak* feels like it's in a special subgenre with *Carrie* and *Fear No Evil*, where picked-on people get revenge, but there's not much to recommend it except Howard's fine performance."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Clint Howard (Coopersmith); R.G. Armstrong (Sarge); Joseph Cortese (Reverend Jameson); Claude Earl Jones (Coach); Haywood Nelson (Kawaslaki); Don Stark (Buba); Charles Tyner (Colonel Kincaid); Louie Gravance (Jo Jo); Jim Greenleaf (Ox); Lynn Hancock (Miss Friedomyer); Loren Lester (Charlie Boy); Kathy McMullen (Kelly); Lenny Montana (Jake); Leonard O'John (Tony); Richard Moll (Father Lorenzo Esteban); Robert Tafu (Old Priest); Sue Casey (Mrs. Caldwell); Kristine Alksog, Thomas Hilliard (Teachers).

CREW: A Leisure Investment Company, Coronet Film Corp. Production, Sylvio Tabet. *Music:* Roger Kellaway. *Film Editor:* Charles Tetoni. *Director of Photography:* Irv Goodnoff. *Associate Producers:* Gerald Hopman, H. Hal Harris. *Executive Producer:* Sylvio Tabet. *Screenplay by:* Joseph Garofalo, Eric Weston. *Story by:* Joseph Garofalo. *Produced by:* Sylvio Tabet, Eric Weston. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Special Effects:* Harry Woolman, John Carter. *Special Visual Effects Makeup by:* Makeup Effects Labs, Douglas White, Allan Apone, Frank Carrisosa. *Stunt Coordinator:* George Fisher. *Directed by:* Eric Weston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

INCANTATION: "And Satan said to the Man of God, 'What would you do tomorrow if you allowed me to die today? What vocation would you pursue if my name disappeared?'"—An interesting conversation, recounted at the beginning of *Evilspeak*.

SYNOPSIS: While cleaning up a church cellar at West Andover Military Academy, a loser and “welfare case,” Cadet Coopersmith (Howard) comes upon what appears to be the Satanic altar of a long-dead Spanish zealot, Father Esteban (Moll). Punished by staff, abused by his fellow cadets, dismissed by the coach of his soccer team, Coopersmith plans to utilize a Satanic Bible and his computer to hold a Black Mass and conjures the spirit of Esteban to wreak vengeance.

When the cadets kill Coopersmith’s puppy as part of a Satanic sacrifice, that’s the final straw, and put-upon Coopersmith allows himself to be possessed by the evil Esteban. He unleashes havoc upon his enemies, killing officers and cadets alike in the church. When the bloodbath’s all over, Coopersmith—who had to declare allegiance to Satan to gain his powers—is relegated to Hell. The computer—like Esteban—must wait patiently to one day return and bring evil to the world of man...

COMMENTARY: Ever noticed that most horror movies don’t often sympathize with the jock? The vapid cheerleader? The popular kid? The school bully? Instead, genre films frequently adopt the side of the teenager who is picked on, disenfranchised, and ridiculed. That’s because—let’s face facts, now—horror movies, comic books, *Star Trek* and the like will simply never be as “mainstream” in contemporary America as the Saturday afternoon football game. The popular crowd, ensconced in such traditions as the big game, the prom, et cetera, therefore feels permitted to ridicule outsiders for liking things the majority judges outside the norm.

However, it’s in the rarified form of the horror film—often directed by the geek, the EC comic book fan, the nerd and the outsider—that this demographic achieves lasting, celluloid revenge.

John Stanley, the sage author of the exquisite, long-lived *Creature Features* film review books, writes there about movies wherein “the worm turns.” In other words, the diffident, picked-on kid wreaks revenge against the bully, the cheerleader, the jock and the other high-schoolers who make his life so miserable. There are many examples from this subgenre, including *Willard* (1971), *Carrie* (1976), *Laserblast* (1978), *Trick or Treat* (1986) and this movie from the 1980s.

A nerd named Coopersmith, a so-called “welfare case” (indicating his status as an outsider), uses his knowledge of computers to summon the Devil and kill his enemies. The cadet, played with intensity and focus by Clint Howard, is a bit of a mess, as many youngsters are at his age. He’s perpetually late, a little antisocial and not particularly

athletic. That's all the ammunition his enemies require to unload on the poor guy.

And boy, do those guys have it coming! The bullies who mock Coopersmith destroy his class project, a model catapult, and much worse, murder his puppy. Animal lovers, and especially dog lovers, will have difficulty with the harrowing scene in which the bullies stab Fred, Coopersmith's cute canine. It's not only a horrible act, but it arises from an utter maliciousness and disregard for life on the part of the cadets, supposedly America's best and brightest. After this moment, one's sympathies really go to Coopersmith.

Taken in total, perhaps it's a primitive thesis, to make a movie all about bad people hurting an innocent kid, pushing him over the edge, and he, in turn, getting bloody revenge. Yet *Evilspeak*, like many horrors, represents a form of entertaining wish-fulfillment. Geeks don't really sit around plotting the deaths of popular kids with techno-Satanism, but who amongst them hasn't entertained the thought after a particularly humiliating encounter? Movies such as *Carrie* and *Evilspeak* represent a harmless, cathartic exploration of that fantasy. It's important to note as well that in most of these films, after the worm turns, he or she is punished for the transgression. So there's an underlying moral compass to these films. That's certainly the case here with poor Coopersmith. Having pledged to be Satan's servant forever and typing his name into Satan's computer, he meets an unhappy fate.

Evilspeak is an efficient horror movie with some terrific attack sequences. There's a shower scene involving the school secretary who stole Coopersmith's book. In the middle of her shower, she's attacked by pigs (summoned by Coopersmith), and falls backwards into the tub, where the animals proceed to eat her. The camera witnesses the secretary being ripped apart in a series of nasty quick cuts. The sequence is remarkably effective.

Later, a nail leaps out of a Christ icon's stone hand during a church ceremony, and flies directly into the reverend's skull, another gross-out moment. Kincaid's head is sheared in two, and pigs attack this fat bully, which is oddly appropriate too. All in all, the pyrotechnics are quite impressive.

In terms of history, *Evilspeak* differentiates itself from Stanley's "worm turn" pack by focusing on an early computer nerd, and his familiarity with that device. This is a good conceit, because in 1982, stars like William Shatner and science-fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov were advertising home computers like the Commodore Vic-20. It was a

computer revolution, and every day, more American homes were seeing the necessity of owning a home computer, whether it was the aforementioned Commodore or an Atari 800. So the idea that something seemingly innocuous could actually be deadly and evil, finds currency in the film. Like *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*, which also premiered in 1982, *Evilspeak* lingers on the idea of technology and the occult mingling, though here the intended apocalypse is depicted in more personal, individual terms, than in the *Halloween* sequel (which involves a microchip activating a piece of Stonehenge and transforming kids into goo). *Evilspeak* accurately predicts that the computer would become a magnet for those without friends, and that a user could be unknowingly talking to a bad influence on the machine ... perhaps even the Devil himself.

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D



Critical Reception

“Maybe all sequels should be made in 3-D ... It is all so gruesome that horror turns to humor and the fun comes from the appreciation of being cleverly conned by director Steve Miner. The way the eyeball of one of Jason’s victims pops out of his skull and seems to sail over the audience’s head is alone worth buying a ticket and putting on the funny glasses.”—Richard Schickel, *Time*, August 30, 1982, page 89.

“[Here,] as in most horror movies, a poke in the sack is followed immediately by a poke through the heart. Miner’s most distinguished innovation is to extend this horror of bodily functions to the most basic: two victims get theirs after a trip to the john.”—David Ansen, *Newsweek*, September 6, 1982, page 75.

“Welcome to Higgins Haven, population ten little Indians. In the year of Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller,’ the Camp Blood killer Jason Voorhees is re-introduced (donning his famous hockey mask for the first time) with disco theme music and 3-D gags. For me, this is the height of slasher movie chic. The Scooby Gang’s all here: sex and drug-crazed teenagers (all looking about thirty years old), an awkward outsider and no fewer than three Daisy Duke lookalikes ... plus the obligatory drunken prophet, a rather exclusive biker gang, and old puck-face himself. Seeking to outwit its predecessors, *Friday the 13th Part 3* gives us death by meat cleaver, knitting needle, pitchfork, harpoon, fireplace poker, electrical fuse box and the ever-memorable machete.

Jason is stabbed, hung, beaten with a shovel and axed in the face. Every single frame of the film defies common sense, but there's no point in arguing with good bad taste.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

“If you've only seen this film in 2-D, you've missed its four or five good moments. *Jason Gets His Hockey Mask* is the relevant ‘canon’ in this film, and it feels very slapped together (no wonder the next film would be the ‘Final Chapter’—okay, you can stop laughing now). In 3-D, it was certainly amusing, especially watching young kids trying to catch eyeballs. As a standalone film in the series, it's one of the lesser efforts (to be one of the lesser *Friday the 13th* films is quite a distinction, however).”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Diana Kimmell (Chris); Paul Kratka (Rick); Tracie Savage (Debbie); Jeffrey Rogers (Andy); Catherine Parks (Vera); Larry Zerner (Shelly); Richard Brooker (Jason); Cheri Maugans (Edna); Gloria Charles (Fox); Rachel Howard (Chili); Kevin O'Brien (Loco); Perla Walter (Mrs. Anchez); David Wiley (Abel), David Katims.

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Jason Inc./Frank Mancuso Jr. Production of a Steve Miner Film. *Associate Producer:* Peter Schindler. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Title Theme:* Harry Manfredini, Michael Zager. *3-D Supervisor:* Martin Jay Sadoff. *Special Makeup Effects:* Makeup Effects Labs, Douglas J. White, Allan Apone, Frank Carisosa. *Executive Producer:* Lisa Barsamian. *Film Editor:* George Hively. *Art Director:* Robb Wilson King. *Director of Photography:* Gerald Feil. *Co-Producer:* Tony Bishop. *Screenplay by:* Martin Kitrosser, Carol Watson. *Based on Characters created by:* Victor Miller, Ron Kurz. *Casting:* Bill Lytle, Dave Emann. *Produced by:* Frank Mancuso Jr. *Directed by:* Steve Miner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The day after the latest massacre near Crystal Lake, a new set of young adults sets out on a weekend vacation in the region. Leading the pack is Chris (Kimmell), who survived an encounter with murderous Jason Voorhees (Brooker) two years earlier; her self-proclaimed “country” boyfriend, Rick (Kratka); a practical joker and makeup buff, Shelly (Zerner); a jock named Andy (Rogers); and Andy's girlfriend, Debbie (Savage). They run afoul of a leather-clad motorcycle gang in the woods, but worse, Jason continues his killing ways, this time using Chris's barn. After her friends drop like flies,

Chris and Jason have their bloody re-match. For the first time, Jason adorns a hockey mask, stealing the affectation from Shelly, whose throat he slits.

COMMENTARY: In the old days of Hollywood, the teenagers like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney would put on a show out back, in the old red barn. In movies such as *Friday the 13th Part 3*, the teenagers go to the barn to die...

After two frightening and effective entries, the *Friday the 13th* movie franchise slips a notch or two with *Part 3 in 3-D*. The performances are all a step down from the previous two horrors, more broadly vetted and more comedic ... and accordingly much less realistic. Also, the oppressive re-use of the same formula (Jason stalks teens; rinse and repeat) reaches critical mass in this entry, weighting the film down with the impression that it's all old hat.

The 3-D aspect of the film is underwhelming for the most part, because it requires characters to jab things at the camera in ludicrous situations (like a 3-D marijuana joint!). This gimmick actually gets in the way of building suspense, though one must admire, at least to a degree, the ingenuity of the harpoon-through-the-eye murder. It seems that all the originality and energy of this movie went into the 3-D; into imagining things that could be directed at the audience, items which include everything from yo-yos to popcorn, to the inevitable eyeballs.



F13-COMP-1

F13-3D-37-15A

Jason nabs Rick (Paul Kratka) in the foreground, while a worried Chris (Dana Kimmell) calls out for him in *Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D*.

Steve Miner, who helmed *Part II*, is a vastly underappreciated director who has crafted fine films in the horror genre, but here he's sabotaged by the lamest screenplay yet in the franchise. The dialogue is risible, but the problems in the film begin and end with the depiction of the characters: They're all clichés.

Some of the characters are stoners so naturally they have to smoke weed in literally *every* scene, and wear bandanas like Cheech and Chong, right? Gang members also show up, but before one can stop to ask what they're doing out in the woods near Crystal Lake on vacation, one marvels at the stereotypical fashion and accoutrements they adorn (leather jackets, cigarettes, motorcycles, beer). It's bad enough that their presence is unmotivated, but the gang appears as though it drove straight in from Hollywood "gang" casting central.



What's scarier? An old nag in curlers or a machete comin' at ya?
A scene from *Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D*.

Jason has changed dramatically in this third installment too. Whereas in *Part II* the famous killer was limber and fast, here he is a shambling, slow-moving Michael Myers redux, hiding behind a hockey mask instead of a Shatner one. It's now *de rigueur*, apparently, that a killer must pursue his victims slowly so as to elongate the terror.

There's also an attempt to bring the series full circle with *Friday the 13th Part 3*'s climax, which is a not abundantly clever inversion of the original ending involving Alice in a boat on Crystal Lake. Here, the final girl is again ensconced in a rowboat, this time after killing Jason, and it is Mrs. Voorhees, head back firmly on her shoulders, who pops up. This ending makes not even a lick of sense, but that's a staple of the series too.

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D does spotlight a good, sustained showdown between scrappy Chris (Kimmell) and Jason, and again, Miner demonstrates his skill in these scenes. He knows when to go to tight framing, and when to go wide. In the scene wherein Chris attempts to flee in a van, but it's out of gas, Jason pursues, and the long shots of Jason nearing sell the horror well. The final battle in the barn is also strong. In the final analysis, it is for these scenes that audiences come to a *Friday* film.

It's just difficult to comprehend why the characters have to be so lame and (pun intended) two-dimensional. These movies work much better when the would-be-victims are people the audiences care for, not figures of fun and low comedy. The audience is encouraged to laugh when these numbskulls get killed in inventive ways, and that's an inferior emotion to empathy; the easy way out. Any director who can stage the chases and murders (and 3-D!) with so much talent, certainly must also know how to convey human nature on screen, so the inevitable question is: Why is this movie so devoid of humanity?

Funeral Home

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kay Hawtry (Grandma); Lesleh Donaldson (Heather); Barry Morse (Mr. Davis); Dean Garbett (Rick Yate); Stephen Miller (Billy); Alfred Humphreys (Joe Yates); Peggy Mahon (Florie); Harvey Atkin (Harry); Rob Warnter (Sheriff); Jack Van Evera (James Chalmers); Les Rubie (Sam); Doris Petrie (Ruby); Bill Lake (Frank); Brett Davidson (Young Rick); Chris Crabb (Teddy); Robert Craig (Barry Oaks); Linda Dalby (Linda); Gerard Jordan (Pete); Eleanor Beecroft (Shirley).

CREW: An MPM Presentation in association with Wescom Productions, Inc., and Barry Allen Productions. *Set Designer:* Roy Forge Smith. *Art Director:* Susan Longmire. *Film Editor:* Ralph Brujes. *Director*

of Photography: Mark Irwin. *Executive Producer:* Patrick Doyle. *Music:* Jerry Fielding. *Written by:* Ida Nelson. *Produced and Directed by:* William Fruet. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “There’s something wrong in that house ... something evil.”—A warning ignored in *Funeral Home*.

SYNOPSIS: A superstitious young lady, Heather (Donaldson) goes to live with her batty Grandma Chalmers (Hawtry) as the old lady converts the family’s small-town funeral home into a tourist bread-and-breakfast establishment.

Several guests arrive almost at once, including the obnoxious Ms. Browning (Mahon). Another tenant is Mr. Davis (Morse), who is searching desperately for his wife, rumored to have run away with Mrs. Chalmer’s absent husband, the former funeral director. But soon Mr. Davis and Ms. Browning have both vanished. When the corpse of a missing guest Ms. Browning—turns up in the river at the bottom of the quarry, Heather, her boyfriend Rick (Garbett)—and his brother, a deputy (Humphreys)—begin to suspect something amiss in the funeral home. After the simpleton groundskeeper Billy (Miller) also disappears, Heather and Rick sneak into the funeral home basement to solve the murderous mystery.

COMMENTARY: Slow as molasses and lacking in both surprises and punch, William Fruet’s *Funeral Home* is a long, tough slog through hoary genre clichés. The umpteenth derivation of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, *Funeral Home*’s horror emerges because a batty woman, played with glee by Kay Hawtry, has kept her dead husband alive, after a fashion, down in the basement of her funeral home. Anyone who threatens to discover that truth is—in the tradition of Norman Bates—promptly done away with in violent fashion. In this case, it isn’t a swamp where the corpses get dumped, but rather a lake at the bottom of a rock quarry.

Funeral Home attempts to divert attention away from the obvious fact that Grandma is the film’s lunatic by adding that old off-the-shelf slasher paradigm character, the groundskeeper (Steven Miller) as a red herring.

Otherwise, the movie consists of dire warning after dire warning to characters that they “must never go down in the cellar.” Also, a black cat hangs around the house and hisses for no reason, appearing periodically to scratch at the kitchen window and to strike terror into the heart of the film’s superstitious final girl, Heather. Really, not

much else of substance occurs, except an interesting flashback (filmed in an eerie blue light) that reveals the good old days of the funeral home, when every funeral was considered sacred.

Funeral Home lazes along to its surprise-free ending, and sleepily plays on that tired chestnut that Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. For Grandma is one of those trademark schizophrenics (like Norman Bates, again) who voices both herself and her dead husband in long, tedious conversations. Seems she killed the naughty funeral director when he attempted to run off with Mr. Davis's wife some years back. She couldn't bear to let the old man go, however, and so kept him close by ... in the basement.

Why then, one wonders—especially considering the corpse and shrine positioned in the basement—does Grandma so willingly accept visitors in her home, to the point that she turns the funeral home into a bed-and-breakfast? You'd think she'd want to remain properly isolated, in secret, but instead, visitors come and go with alarming regularity and yes, even visit the cellar. At least if she kept the place a funeral home, she could claim that her husband's corpse was “getting work done,” you know? As it stands, the premise of *Funeral Home* makes little sense. How many tourists would want to stay in a bed-and-breakfast that until recently housed corpses and still reeks of formaldehyde?

The most interesting element of *Funeral Home* is its title. In the 1980s, a number of horror movies sought to create terrors around titles involving the corpse preparation industry. There was *Mortuary*, *Mausoleum*, *Funeral Home*, even *Pet Sematary*. But few of the other films are as dull and derivative as this movie.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Grandma declares at one point in *Funeral Home*, and this reviewer couldn’t agree more with that sentiment. This is a difficult-to-find film, and not at all worth the hunt.

Halloween III: Season of the Witch

★ ½

Critical Reception

“It’s a solid fright film with a novel premise. Still, how come bugs and snakes emanate from the victim’s pulverized faces?”—Kim Holston and Tom Winchester, *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Film Sequels, Series and Remakes*, McFarland and Company, 1997, page 248.

“The concept was chilling as well as campy, but the final film seemed exploitative and diffidently made ... This third sequel is an unlikely and sadistic story not very well told.”—Richard Meyers, *The Great Science Fiction Films*, Citadel Press, 1983, page 228.

“The marriage of mysticism and the microchip at the film’s heart ... is swamped by the emphasis on maintaining a quota of gory shock effects. Yet the break from the psycho-killer formula is welcome, and there’s much pleasing ingenuity on display in the yoking of such disparate models as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and ... *Telefon*.”—Phil Hardy, *The Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction*, William Morrow, 1984, page 381.

“As a film in the *Halloween* series, this film was all kinds of a bummer. As a follow-up to Nigel Kneale’s classic British Quatermass series, however, it had all kinds of potential. The title, however, killed it, setting up an expectation that really hurt this film. Originally, Nigel Kneale and John Carpenter attempted to work together, but their script and their relationship ultimately fell apart. Underneath it all, there was a good movie in here somewhere. It was competently directed, Carpenter and Howarth did some really good music, but it just ... wasn’t *Halloween*. Carpenter and Debra Hill had initially planned to do annual *Halloween* films, with a different story each year, which might have been fine—they just never sold it to us. Too bad. This is one of those films that could have been a contender.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tom Atkins (Dr. Daniel Challis); Stacey Nelkin (Ellie Grimbridge); Dan O’Herlihy (Conal Cochrane); Michael Curry (Rafferty); Ralph Strait (Buddy Kepler); Jadeen Barbor (Betty Kupler); Bradley Schacter (Little Buddy); Garn Stephens (Marge Gutman); Nancy Loomis (Linda Challis); Jon Terry (Starker); Al Berry (Harry Grimbridge); Wendy Wessberg (Teddy); Essex Smith (Walter Jones); John McBride (Sheriff); Dick Warlock (Assassin).

CREW: Universal/MCA and Moustpaha Akkad presents A John Carpenter/Debra Hill Production. *Casting:* Susan Shaw. *Film Editor:* Millie Moore. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Jeffrey Chernov. *Special Makeup:* Tom Burman. *Music:* John Carpenter, Alan Howarth. *Associate Producer:* Barry Bernadini. *Production Designer:* Peter Jamison. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Executive Producers:* Irwin Yablans, Joseph Wolf. *Stunts:* Dick Warlock. *Produced by:* Debra Hill, John Carpenter. *Written and Directed by:* Tommy Lee Wallace.

MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Harry Grimbridge (Berry), who knows the secret of the Silver Shamrock company, a producer of Halloween masks, escapes from two deadly, gray-suited assassins, only to be murdered in the hospital. His physician, Dr. Challis (Atkins) and Harry's daughter, Ellen (Nelkin) team up to investigate and backtrack Harry to Santa Mira, the town where the Silver Shamrock Novelties Factory operates.

The entire town is monitored by video and run by a malevolent CEO, Conal Cochrane (O'Herlihy). An Irishman with a sense of deviltry, Cochrane plans to include a strange, mystical microchip in every mask he sells ... which will transform the head of the wearer (inevitably young trick-or-treaters) into a gooey stew of snakes and insects. Challis, whose own children plan to wear the masks, must prevent Silver Shamrock from airing a commercial on All Hallows Eve that will send the signal and activate the deadly chip.

COMMENTARY: With Dean Cundey's camera capturing his particular and notable variety of impenetrable nighttime landscapes, and John Carpenter contributing his typical, pulse-pounding soundtrack, the second sequel to 1978's *Halloween* has an aura that very much approaches the "real thing," at least on a surface glance. Adding to that feeling of authenticity, director Tommy Lee Wallace repeats many behind-the-scenes Carpenterisms in *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*. There are numerous stingers, those trademark J.C. moments in which something malevolent leaps into the foreground of shots, accompanied by a zingy jolt on the soundtrack. There are also long, slow, nearly hypnotic tracking shots, another hallmark of the *Halloween* films. In all, it's a remarkable simulation of a brilliant original, but that still doesn't mean *Halloween III* is a good film.

Although it is commendable, perhaps, that *Halloween III* has left behind the paradigm of "knife-kill" films and slasher, the film's confusing story is not necessarily a step in the right direction. The narrative that has replaced the original's elegant template (a mental patient let loose on middle America Halloween night) is a confusing mess with too many plot holes to remain coherent. Instead, the over-complicated, nonsensical tale raises a number of logistical and dramatic questions.

In the film, Santa Mira is a weird, industrial factory town, reminiscent of Midwich in *Village of the Damned* (1960), Stepford in *The Stepford Wives* (1975), or part of the ongoing Quatermass saga. This setting sets off some alarms, and the narrative police are needed. Are all of the

town's inhabitants in on Cochrane's plan to destroy the children of America with evil, supernatural masks? If so, how come? Are they all, like Cochrane, descendant from Irish warlocks? If not, then how can the workers fail to realize what the villain is up to, since so many town folk are employed at the mask factory?

Furthermore, have all the town's people been replaced by lookalike androids (as in *The Stepford Wives*) or do they remain human? What about the town's infrastructure? How could the community's Chamber of Commerce, or the police force, for that matter, permit Cochrane's loudspeakers and video surveillance cameras on every single street corner? This is America, after all, so wouldn't at least one person living in Santa Mira be concerned about the civil liberty violations occurring in the open?

The bottom line is that the concept of an "evil" town is not sufficiently explained or realized in this film. Carpenter returned to the idea of an evil village in *In the Mouth of Madness* in 1995, but the concept is executed well there because that town, at least, stands on the border separating fiction from reality. Its scary denizens are the denizens of Lovecraft fiction. No such concept holds the idea together in *Season of the Witch*.

Halloween III also fails to explain character motivation, and since this movie features a James Bond-like plot about a super-villain using supernatural means to kill children across America, that's a problem. Consider, why should Cochrane wish to kill children? Why not target the adults? When asked why, Cochrane responds, "Do I need a reason?" Though it is always commendable to forge mysteries and remain ambiguous when ambiguity is warranted, so much of *Halloween III* hinges on this storyline, that yeah, Cochrane ought to have a reason for wanting to murder America's children. Sorry.

Truth be told, Cochrane's evil scheme makes no sense. Speaking logically now, he has no chance of real success. Assume for a moment that Cochrane is victorious, and that the evil Silver Shamrock masks transform America's children into fetid, gooey snake-and-bug stew. Certainly, someone will put two and two together and realize that only the kids wearing Cochrane's masks died. So it will be fairly easy to trace Cochrane. His company paid for the commercials which caused the transformation. Knowing this, America's enraged parents will nuke Santa Mira and Cochrane off the planet. Why create a dastardly plan that can so obviously be traced back to the source? Furthermore, why draw attention to your operation when you're the tyrant of your own little suburb? Cochrane rules Santa Mira with

androids, video cameras and loudspeakers, why mess with a good thing?

Secondly, Cochrane's plan, though a nice nod to America's capitalistic traits and the effectiveness of television commercials, is utterly bogus from a marketing standpoint. The Cochrane Silver Shamrock masks are among the most bland Halloween masks imaginable. A kid can choose from a skeleton, a witch and a pumpkin. Wow! So, you might ask, what would happen to all the trick-or-treaters who head out on Halloween night as Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Kirk, Ninja Turtles, E.T., Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster or the Wolf Man? Even if Cochrane could conceivably corner the market with his simple and uninteresting Halloween masks (which isn't likely, let's face it), a fairly large percentage of children in America would still opt for the aforementioned costumes, thus making Cochrane's plan a failure.

And what about parents (who don't wear masks)? What about those children who are not watching television at 9:00 pm because they are still out collecting candy? What about those kids in bed already? What about those kids who aren't allowed to watch TV, because sports are on, or news? What about the families who do not celebrate Halloween? What about kids at the tender age of thirteen who have stopped trick-or-treating? Although *Halloween III* tries to make the point through the oft-repeated Silver Shamrock mask commercial that people will buy just about anything marketed by television, Cochrane's plan—the central concept in the movie—is both childish and full of holes.

Halloween III boasts other dramatic inconsistencies. The character named Ellie, played by Stacey Nelkin, is—at some point—replaced by an android. I submit the movie itself doesn't even know when this occurred. Was she an android throughout the film, as her line to Challis in the motel ("I'm older than I look") indicates? If so, then why did she lead Challis to Santa Mira to jeopardize Cochrane's plan? If she is an android, why is she not as bland and waxy as the other gray suits? Challis makes love to her, so it seems he would notice that she's *different*, even if he is a heavy drinker.

If Ellie is not an android throughout *Halloween III*, then did the unbelievably efficient Cochrane just happen to have an Ellie model standing by? In case she would show up on the night of Halloween? If instead he built the android on the spot once she had arrived (with Challis close behind) then the process takes only five minutes. If Ellie was not a robot throughout the entire motion picture, then what happened to the original woman? Is she dead? Captured? Converted?

Why does Challis never go back to find or rescue her?

Lastly, why does Cochrane bother to build an Ellie android in the first place? Was he planning for Challis to escape from his lair all along? If so, why then did he bother tying up Challis and putting the evil mask on over his face? Furthermore, if Ellis is just Cochrane's prick-teasing mechanical minion, why does she stand idly by during the film's climax and watch Challis destroy the mask-making factory? Instead of stopping Challis when he is jeopardizing the master plan, this super accurate android servant (down to her decorated fingernails) waits until Challis has escaped the facility. Then, as they drive away to safety, she attacks. Why did she delay? Obviously, this a transparent ploy to give the story a final sting but, like so many elements in *Halloween III*, it is not dramatically motivated.



Dr. Pumpkin, I presume? A scientist dons one of the deadly Silver Shamrock masks in *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982).

Despite so many flaws, *Halloween III* manages a few interesting touches. The title sequence is among the unique moments of the film, an Atari age updating of the jack-o'-lantern motif featured in *Halloween* and *Halloween II*. It nicely reflects that the trick or treat this time will be terror through technology.

Although *Halloween III* is loaded with gore, it reaches its pinnacle of

atmospheric horror in a well-orchestrated sequence near the denouement. There's a nice montage of little hands picking Halloween masks as costumed children from Dayton, Omaha, Baton Rouge, Los Angeles and New York march across nighttime landscapes. Behind these moving silhouetted figures, a deep orange sky looms. An evocative image, this view of little goblin-like critters traversing what could be the surface of another planet captures the chill of anticipation on All Hallow's Eve quite lyrically. Night has not yet fallen, only twilight, but the promise of a ghostly evening, from sea to shining sea, captures the universality of the trick-or-treat experience. It's too little too late in a silly film, yet it nicely sets up a mood of terror before the climax.

Halloween III is an honest attempt to take the *Halloween* franchise in a new direction, but that direction is purely and simply ridiculous, which is the reason that so many fans of the series disowned it. The film is a failure not for embracing something new, but because it makes no sense. Fans would have embraced it, even without Michael Myers as the star, had it been a good movie.

In 2004, Martin Harris published a fascinating thesis in *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* called “You Can’t Kill The Boogeyman: *Halloween III* and the modern Horror Franchise.” He praised the film as satire on a triple basis. To wit:

Halloween III articulates its satire in three distinct ways: (1) by establishing and maintaining a complicated, not-so-harmonious relationship to the first two *Halloween* films, a relationship that ultimately becomes more parodic than deferential; (2) by providing an ongoing, general commentary on consumerism, most specifically illustrated by Cochrane’s successful marketing and selling of the deadly Halloween masks; and (3) by appearing to express a desire to “kill” the *Halloween* franchise.¹²

On the second point, I’m in total agreement with the inventive Mr. Harris. *Halloween III* was clearly designed to make a pertinent and timely statement about the potency of television as a selling venue. On his other two points?

Not so much.

Can anyone plausibly argue that *Halloween III* was crafted to intentionally murder a popular film franchise, especially given that the first two *Halloween* films were enormously profitable? Also, five years after the disappointing *Season of the Witch*, the series returned

for a fourth installment, which also undercuts this suggestion. You know the easiest and most inexpensive way to kill a franchise, don't you? It isn't to go to all the trouble and expense of making, marketing and distributing a flop, a bad movie. Rather, *just don't make the sequel at all*. Instead ... stop.

Further, as Mr. Harris points out himself, John Carpenter and Debra Hill hoped to continue the franchise in an anthology format, for which *Halloween III* was a "pilot" of sorts. They didn't want to kill *Halloween*, only transform it.

Harris writes that *Halloween III* can be viewed as a "creative investigation into the complex workings that often lie behind the conception, design and production of"¹³ Hollywood films, and recommends the film on that basis. Yet, he doesn't address or explain the film's narrative shortcomings.

To restate: The fault in *Halloween III* is not the manner in which devoted fans responded to it, it's in the film's faulty, utterly preposterous narrative. Michael Myers or no Michael Myers, the plot makes no sense. Study the fan responses to *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* (1996) and *Halloween Resurrection* (2001). Fans didn't like these films either, and both of those series entries *did* feature the return of Michael Myers. Why didn't enthusiasts like those entries? Because they're bad movies.

Just like *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*.

Hell Night

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"*Hell Night* is a relentlessly lackluster example of the Dead Teenager movie..."—Roger Ebert, *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie*, Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2000, page 162.

"A group of college brats are persuaded to stay the night in a spooky mansion (padlocks and a fifteen-foot iron fence help keep them in their places). Trouble is that the mansion is spooky, and it is also inhabited by a couple of deranged gimps. One by one, the sorority hopefuls die. This derivative piece is trivial and sophomoric yet loaded to the gills with bargain-basement shocks and scares. Linda Blair does well, and the ending is especially good, but at 101 minutes,

the film is tiring and overdrawn. Think William Castle's *House on Haunted Hill* lumped with *National Lampoon's Animal House* and you have it—*Hill House* (eh, *Hell Night*).”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

“This is one of Linda Blair’s best films, and it’s too bad that making that observation might draw chuckles from the crowd. She’s not a bad actress, and she brings this film up to a level that most slasher films don’t reach. The magic formula is to have characters that the audience can care about placed in jeopardy. Carpenter did it. Craven does it. Hooper does it, and *Friday the 13th* films crassly turn that idea on its head by making you hate the characters. Blair brings so-so material in the script to life with her performance, and it helps the film, which has some genuine tension in its third act.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Linda Blair (Marty); Vincent Van Patten (Seth); Kevin Brophy (Peter); Jenny Neumann (May); Suki Goodwin (Denise); Jimmy Sturtevant (Scott); Peter Barton (Jeff); Hal Ralston (Older Cop); Gary Fox (Younger Cop); Gloria Helman (Party Girl); Ronald Gans (Driver).

CREW: *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Film Editor:* Tony Di Marco. *Music:* Dan Wyman. *Executive Producers:* Joseph Wolf, Chuck Russell. *Written by:* Randolph Feldman. *Producers:* Irwin Yablans, Bruce Cohn Curtis. *Stunt Coordinator:* Freddie Hice. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Special Effects Makeup:* Kenneth Horn, Tom Schwartz. *Special Effects:* Court Wizard Productions. *Directed by:* Tom De Simone. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Don’t try climbing the fence. You might cut your nuts off.”—Smart advice to the male pledges in *Hell Night*.

SYNOPSIS: Four pledges, Marty (Blair), Jeff (Barton), Seth (Van Patten) and Denise (Goodwin), must endure the initiation ritual of Hell Night, spending the night (six hours) in abandoned Garth Manor, where—twelve years earlier—Raymond Garth murdered his wife Lillian and his deformed children. The youngest of the monstrous clan—Andrew—remains unaccounted for to this day, and some believe he still lives on the premises.

Once the foursome is locked behind the Garth Manor gate, fraternity and sorority pranksters, led by Peter (Brophy), try to scare them with practical jokes. Meanwhile, Seth and Denise get intimate, and Marty

and Peter become friends. Before long, a monstrous presence is aroused by the presence of the young people, and Peter's troop of jesters gets killed first. Peter's girl, May (Neumann), is decapitated; his tech expert, Scott (Sturtevant), is hanged, and finally even Peter is killed. Then the dark presence focuses his attention inside, using a trap door to surprise Denise in her own bedroom.

Realizing they are in deep trouble, Scott escapes from the premises, climbing over the razor-sharp spikes of the gate, and goes to seek help for Marty and Jeff. When the police don't believe him, he returns to Garth Manor with a shotgun and blows away a monstrous assailant. But Hell Night isn't quite over just yet...

COMMENTARY: As a steadfast admirer of the horror genre, I'm always pleased when a film that could easily prove lousy expends the energy to overcome its clichéd premise and go that extra mile. *Hell Night* is that kind of movie. It's a scary little thriller that, in fairness, could be a little shorter, but there are some nice surprises, and the characterizations actually make this group of teens seem likable, even human, rather than the cookie-cutter "dead teenagers" of so many films.



Marty (Linda Blair) discovers Jeff's (Peter Barton) corpse, and the *de rigueur* “tour of the dead” begins in *Hell Night* (1982).

Take Seth, played by Vincent Van Patten. We've all seen his type before, he's the horny jock who doesn't survive the night because all he cares about is partying and sex. Yet, *Hell Night* flouts convention by making Seth more than a mindless jerk. He actually proves heroic and loyal, attempting to rescue his friends. He evidences a degree of resourcefulness and intelligence not always found in the slasher

paradigm.

Ditto for Marty, played by Linda Blair. Some scholars have made hay out of the fact several final girls in the slasher paradigm have manly names, like Marty, but whether or not that's significant, Blair crafts a unique and interesting character. She's a smart young woman who fixes cars (her father is a garage mechanic), is resolutely blue collar, in contrast to the other pledges, and shares an interesting conversation regarding capitalism and the division between rich and poor with the ill-fated Jeff.



May (Jenny Neumann) gets the bloody point in *Hell Night*.

Of course, this isn't Robert Altman material, but it's better than the prototype really demands, and that's worth championing. Both Van Patten and Blair make their characters realistic and identifiable, and if identification is fostered, a movie is one step closer to being scary. That's certainly the case here.

Hell Night doesn't include a red herring but there is a surprise about the number of killers involved, which actually gives this film something in common with *The Funhouse* (1981) or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), where murderers work in tandem. The film also includes effective use of P.O.V. shots without overusing them—another major feat. And there's even suspense, after a fashion, when Seth freaks out and climbs the spiked fence. Once outside, he finds only useless authority, but that's beside the point. Marty's one tough cookie and at a critical moment, her mechanical skills come in handy, almost saving the day.

Hell Night doesn't provide a very good glimpse at the evil Garth, at least until the film's conclusion, and that also works in its favor. It's much better (and much scarier) to wonder what's lurking in the basement and interior corridors of an old, creepy house, than to know for sure. This way, the film feels more like the haunted house attraction or amusement park ride it is.

Is *Hell Night* original? Not particularly. But honestly, count the number of times you enjoyed a ride on a roller coaster only to turn to a buddy and say, "I liked that roller coaster a lot, but it wasn't very original." Originality in films like these is beside the point. *Hell Night* earns its scares effectively, and features a nice performance or two.

Horror Planet **(a.k.a. *Inseminoid*)**

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robin Clarke (Mark); Jennifer Ashley (Holly); Stephanie Beacham (Kate); Steven Grives (Gary); Barry Houghton (Karl); Rosalind Lloyd (Gail); Victoria Tennant (Barbra); Trevor Thomas (Mitch); Heather Wright (Sharon); David Baxt (Ricky); Judy Geeson (Sandy); Dominic Jephcott (Dean); John Segal (Jeff); Kevin O'Shea (Corin); Robert Pugh (Roy).

CREW: Sir Run Run Shaw presents a Jupiter film production. *Casting:*

Rose Tobias Shaw. *Music*: John Scott. *Director of Photography*: John Metcalfe. *Film Editor*: Peter Boyle. *Production Design*: Hayden Pearce. *Costumes*: Olinkha. *Special Effects*: Nick Maley. *Executive Producer*: Peter M. Schlesinger. *Produced by*: Richard Gordon, David Speechley. *In Charge of Production*: Roy Corbett. *Screenplay by*: Nick and Gloria Maley. *Directed by*: Norman J. Warren. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A team of scientists on a distant planet investigate a recently excavated alien tomb where the previous inhabitants were mysteriously rendered extinct. An explosion inside the tomb injures two scientists, even as the archaeologists determine that everything in the alien mythology involved doubling, twins, and pairs—a reflection, perhaps, of the fact that the planet orbits two stars. One of the injured men goes insane and flees into the caves with murderous intensity, but is ultimately stopped by scientist Kate (Beacham). Then, a monster attacks two more scientists in the tomb, leaving Sandy (Geeson) comatose but alive to be rescued.

When Sandy returns to the base, it is discovered she is pregnant, and she experiences frightening memories of being inseminated by an alien creature. After this discovery, the tomb is destroyed in an explosion, ending the team's research permanently and leaving them awaiting a rescue team. But before that can happen, Sandy—now a protective mother of the entire alien gene pool—goes insane and begins to murder her crew mates, even going so far as to eat their entrails to nourish the developing young in her womb. Sandy gives birth to two monstrous twins who nurse on human blood and don't want to let anyone off the planet alive.

COMMENTARY: And critics claim that *Saturn 3* is bad?

The decade of President Reagan is also the decade of cheap *Alien* (1979) rip-offs. Ridley Scott's neo-classic about a group of "space truckers" happening upon a malevolent extra-terrestrial in the ass-end of space spawned a number of imitations from 1980 to 1989 (and beyond). These movies have titles such as *Galaxy of Terror* (1981), *Creature* (1984), *Biohazard*, and, yes, *Horror Planet* (also known in some quarters by the catchy descriptor, *Inseminoid*).

Although *Horror Planet* features a strong (and attractive) British cast, including Judy Geeson, Stephanie Beacham and Victoria Tennant, there's no getting around the fact that it's really a cheapjack exploitation film, more interested in spilled blood than outer space thrills. Most of it was filmed in a cave, and the alien is represented by

a fakish, rubbery-looking B.E.M. (Bug Eyed Monster). As far as sets and costumes go, welder helmets appear to double as “space” helmets.

Yeah, it's that kind of movie.

That established, given *Horror Planet*'s obvious low production values, it's not nearly as terrible as it might have been, in part because the central theme is interesting, and—truth be told—a bit different from *Alien*'s aesthetic. Here, Judy Geeson—in a hysterical, violent, and efficient performance—becomes host to two alien embryos. As an expectant mother carrying alien progeny, a new biological imperative has been imposed over her old, human one. Once impregnated, she will do *anything* to protect her developing babies. She will accommodate a new diet (which includes human entrails) to nourish her tots, and eliminate any and all threats to them. The majority of the film involves not the evil alien twins on the loose wreaking havoc, but a madwoman subverted by her body and very biology into betraying her own kind. This story element gives the movie a hair of distinction, amidst all the decade's *Alien* clones.

Horror Planet also develops a unique idea about the alien mythology, about how everything on the planet involves twins and doubling. Again, maybe that's not the best, most logical idea ever to arise from a space horror flick, but it's not something seen in every one since time immemorial, either.

In addition, every now and then, director Norman J. Warren stages an effective shot. For instance, there's a funeral for the dead crewmen on the eerie purple surface of the planet. Six people in protective suits stand around the burial mounds, and the camera slowly pulls back to reveal the vastness of the planet, up and up (to a high angle). This shot—an alien vista—expresses the survivors' isolation as well as the scope of the landscape. It isn't overtly fake, either.



Sandy (Judy Geeson) suffers first an abduction ... and then alien impregnation in *Horror Planet* (1982).

In its own ultra-cheap fashion, *Horror Planet* clearly attempts to evoke some of the same fears raised by *Rosemary's Baby*, albeit in a much less subtle, much more gory fashion. Those fears involve pregnancy, and the terror of something "alien" growing inside the body.

In *Rosemary's Baby*, poor Mia Farrow's character had strange visions of her night in bed with Satan. In *Alien*, of course, the chest burster was born of Kane (John Hurt). In *Horror Planet*, Judy Geeson is abducted by an alien, forced onto an experimentation table, and her legs spread. The camera adopts her point of view, looking down the length of her body to her splayed legs and raised knees ... when an *alien head rises between them*, prior to impregnation. The fear of rape, the fear of losing control of one's body to something foreign and inhuman is thus rendered powerfully enough in *Horror Planet* to generate a few chills.

Like *Alien*, the "reproductive process" in *Horror Planet* makes a mockery of the human body and its mechanisms. The uber-mother who protects her babies at all costs is transformed into a psychotic killer here. When she is killed, the twins have nobody to "nurse" them, and so the little ghouls nourish themselves on Sharon's blood, sucking open wounds on the dead crew member. That's a disgusting image, but in keeping with the film's theme about motherhood and

alien babies. There's something here too about "transformation" and body image, a big theme of the decade. Sandy (Geeson) undergoes a change that should be joyous (hosting a new life) but the process of pregnancy is defined as parasitical and awful, perfectly in keeping with the tone of ... *Alien*.

House by the Cemetery



Critical Reception

"The guy doing the voiceover on the commercial for this film was way over the top with his voice—I mean, Zacherley over the top. The film is ... tepid. It takes a long time to get going, and never really satisfies. It's done with some style, and some of the outdoor photography is nice, but it never really adds up to anything."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

"Italy's splatter-meister Lucio Fulci's most harrowing and poetic work. Shirking the gore-for-the-sake-of-gore aesthetics of some of his previous efforts, Fulci deploys his blood and grue within a surprisingly cohesive and compelling storyline. Still, Fulci is no Mario Bava, but *House by the Cemetery* does successfully elevate this highly revered (and highly reviled) director to the ranks of Dario Argento and other Italian contemporaries."—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Katherine MacColl, Paolo Malco, Ania Pieroni, Giovanni Frezza, Silvia Collatina, Dogmar Lassander.

CREW: *Story:* Elisa Briganti. *Screenplay:* Dardano Sacchetti, Georgio Marcuzzo, Lucio Fulci. *Production Designer:* Massimo Lentini. *Film Editor:* Vincenzo Tomassi. *Original Music Composed and Conducted by:* Walter Rizzati. *Director of Photography:* Fabrizio De Angelis. *Directed by:* Lucio Fulci. *MPAA Rating:* Unrated. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A New York City researcher moves with his wife and son to a home in New England called Oak Mansion for a six month spell. A colleague of his died there after apparently killing his mistress, and now the researcher is hoping to take over his work, unaware that his boy, Bob, has seen the spirit of a young girl who warns him to stay

away from the house.

The home, which stands in a cemetery, was once owned by the mysterious Freudstein family, and there's something odd about the last Mr. Freudstein, whose tomb rests smack-dab in the middle of the house. Down in the cellar, a murderous creature dwells, and begins to commit murder, killing the family's maid, Anne. Bob and his mother are confronted by the horror in the cellar, the seemingly immortal Mr. Freudstein, and try desperately to escape his grasp. When Bob attempts to free himself through a hole in the cellar ceiling, he finds it an unusual doorway to an unexpected place.

COMMENTARY: At first blush, Lucio Fulci's *House by the Cemetery* feels uncomfortably like a barefaced Italian imitator of Kubrick's *The Shining*. To wit: a sensitive little boy, is psychically warned (in this case by a girl inhabiting a photograph) not to travel to a haunted house. However, he must go, because his family will be living there for six months (in *The Shining*, it was for the winter). And, not unexpectedly, the house itself boasts a terrible history of tragedy, murder and death.

But *House by the Cemetery* is a Lucio Fulci film, and that means, among other things, nothing in the film is as one expects it. The *Shining*-like premise is only a thread in this crazy film's unique tapestry, and before it's done, *House by the Cemetery* travels in unexpected, even bizarre directions. Depending on point of view, those directions are either inspired or ridiculous.

Of all Fulci's contributions in the 1980s, *House by the Cemetery* is the only one, for my taste, that includes real, palpable and sustained terror. The artist's other films may be exciting, unnerving and over-the-top disgusting, yet *House by the Cemetery* is perhaps Fulci's masterpiece because of the unsettling mood it confidently establishes. And ironically, the director creates this mood through his focus on one, simple prop.

A door.

A door in this mysterious house by the cemetery, one plainly visible in the kitchen, leads down an old staircase to a dark, expansive basement. Sometimes this kitchen door is ajar a little bit, sometimes it swings open on its own, and sometimes—when characters are exploring that scary basement—the door slam shuts. On a few occasions, Fulci's camera zooms in on the door, or pulls back to reveal the door as a quiet player in a scene, but no joke, this portal to the

unknown is a major reason why the film creates a mood of suspense. For much of the film's running time, audiences don't know what's inhabiting the basement, why the door changes its position and yet there it is, constantly in shot as though whispering, "Check me out!"

It's difficult to pin down, but sometimes the most simple ideas are the scariest ones. Like being attacked while taking a shower (or the 1980s slasher movie equivalent, getting stabbed while you're on the toilet). In this case, the notion of a doorway to a dark basement and the mystery of what lies behind that door is enough to generate fear. It's uncertain whether this approach was intentional (with Fulci, you never know), but it's undeniably effective.

The finest, most terrifying moment occurs near the end, and it involves that door. Bob is down in the basement and is confronted by the evil figure (a ghoulish murderer, Freudstein, who prolongs his own life with the creative use of corpses). Bob flees up the stairs as the door ahead is closing, and the tension is almost unbearable as he tries to squeeze through the rapidly closing portal.

Augmenting the terror, there's a P.O.V. shot from behind and below the boy, at the bottom of the rickety staircase, approaching the desperate boy. The killer is nearing...

At some time or another, everybody has experienced the fear of being chased, or getting inadvertently locked in a room, and this moment exploits that universal feeling perfectly. Even better, Fulci takes this madness a step further. The boy's father hears his son's screams as the door to the basement is closed and Bob is trapped with the monster. So, like a good father, the man grabs an axe and tries to chop the wooden door down. But at the same time, the ghoul grabs the boy's head and pins it to the surface of the door. The axe blade bursts through the wood, mere inches from Bob's head, again and again.

And, well, it's pretty damn harrowing.

Much of this film concerns "doors" and the unexpected, sometimes horrific places they lead. There's a tomb with a door smack in the middle of the mansion; there's the door in the kitchen leading to the chambers of horror below; and finally, there's what can only be called a "temporal door." Specifically, at the end of the film, Bob and his desperate mother attempt to flee the basement. They climb a ladder, but Mom gets dragged down in horrible, vicious fashion (her face slamming against each ladder rung). Bob makes good his escape, but miraculously ends up emerging back in the house ... in a different time

period, apparently in 1879. He's suddenly there with the little girl who warned him not to come.

One might read this climax more literally, as a representation of Bob's death. In other words, he's ended up with the other victims, haunting the gloomy house, but the time travel answer works better. Either way, it's a shocker, and truth be told, kinda brilliant in its own warped fashion. There's so much ambiguity about everything else in the film, that an ambiguous ending just augments the mood.

Which isn't meant to indicate that this is a mood movie and that there isn't gore galore. The real estate lady experiences a particularly nasty death, one in which she is stabbed repeatedly, and the camera focuses on the weapon digging around in her wounds. Then focus turns to her neck, where blood fountains out for several seconds. There's even a dash of slow-motion photography to linger on the spurting blood. Another character, Norman bleeds to death after his neck is ripped open; Freudstein is stabbed, the knife plunging into his maggot-ridden body. It's all rather disgusting, and par for the course (or par for the corpse?) with Fulci, so his admirers won't feel disappointed.

Additionally, *House by the Cemetery* features another bizarre Fulci tic that students of his work will recognize. An inordinate amount of the film's footage involves close-ups of eyes; zooms in on 'em, in particular. The cast thus emotes through twitching and enlarging their eyes, which eliminates a degree of subtlety or verisimilitude. Sometimes, a scene involves as many as three tonal shifts in expressive eye-acting, which proves laughable.

As usual, Fulci has little concept of how to make a plot work sensibly from point A to point Z without some real hiccups of logic and motivation in between. For instance, a bloody corpse is dragged into the basement by the unseen killer. The attractive young maid finds the tell-tale blood trail on the kitchen floor and helpfully cleans it up without comment, leading the audience to believe she is actually in on the Freudstein curse; that she is a tacit accomplice of that lurking evil from down below. Cementing this impression, she tells nobody in the family about the messy, bloodied floor! Again, this seems to indicate she's in on the secret.

Well, of course, she isn't. She gets killed by the monster below as well, and so the viewer is left confused. Why didn't she share with the family that there was a blood trail on the kitchen floor? Why did she tacitly clean it up? In a situation like that, common sense indicates you'd tell your employer about the situation first, and then, most

likely, the police.

But that's the flaw in Fulci films. They can't sustain a sensible plot. In the case of *House by the Cemetery*, that doesn't prevent the film *and that door* from being really scary.

The House on Sorority Row

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kathryn McNeil (Katherine); Eileen Davidson (Vicki); Lois Kelso Hunt (Mrs. Slater); Christopher Lawrence (Dr. Beck); Janis Zido (Liz); Robin Meloy (Jeanie); Harley Kozak (Diane); Jodi Draigie (Morgan); Ellen Dorohe (Stevie); Michael Kuhn (Peter); Michael Sergio (Rick); Ruth Walsh (Mother); Ed Heath (Policeman); Jean Schertler (Nurse); Larry Singer (Photographer).

CREW: Artists Releasing Corp. Presents a Mark Rosman Film. *Art Director:* Vincent Perano. *Film Editor:* Jean-Marc Vasseur. *Director of Photography:* Timothy Suhrstedt. *Music:* Richard H. Band. *Associate Producer:* Alec Rabinowitz. *Production Associate:* Rene Eram. *Co-Producer:* Ed Beyer. *Executive Producers:* John Ponchock, W. Thomas McMahon. *Producers:* Mark Rosman, John G. Clark. *Stunt Coordinator:* Scott Leva. *Special Effects Design and Supervision:* Rob E. Holland, Makeup Effects Labs. *Written and Directed by:* Mark Rosman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When nasty old house mother Mrs. Slater (Hunt) forbids her young wards from holding a party at her house after graduation, the sorority sisters band together to pull a prank on the not-quite-sane old woman, who seems to harbor a terrible secret from her past. The prank goes horribly wrong thanks to the cruel and selfish Vicki (Davidson), who shoots Slater.

The sisters conspire to hide the body in the dirty pool nearby, before the party. But that night, someone begins to brutally murder the sisters with Mrs. Slater's ornamental walking cane. Distracted from her blind date with Peter (Kuhn), the likable Katherine (McNeil) seeks help from Dr. Beck (Lawrence), and he tells her a story about a night twenty years earlier when Mrs. Slater—as part of a fertility experiment—had a traumatic delivery. Katherine comes to realize that Slater hid her deformed son in the sorority house for all these years, and that from the attic window he witnessed her brutal murder. Now, the killer is coming for Beck and Katherine.

COMMENTARY: *The House on Sorority Row* is a textbook example of the 1980s slasher film. It opens with a deadly preamble set in June of 1961 during an ill-fated at-home birth. The film then moves on to reveal all the character archetypes we expect: crazy Mrs. Slater, the sorority house mother, is the red herring, Katherine is the intrepid final girl, and Vicki is the despicable practical joker. The organizing principle is the college sorority-fraternity milieu and the transgression that starts the gory murders is a sorority prank gone horribly wrong.

Along the way, there's the gratuitous breast shot and a final chase that is suspenseful. The death scenes are short but punchy, and at the end of it all, there's a sting in the tale/tail moment when a presumed killer—inevitably—comes back to life.

All the requisite plot points are here, but that's not enough of a basis to recommend the film. The best slasher films are almost universally the ones that adopt all these *de rigueur* ingredients and then finds some way to do something new or different with 'em.

House on Sorority Row boasts a devilish sense of humor, and that's a plus. Especially ironic is the moment when the camera captures a sorority house banner that reads "Everything is coming up roses," right after Mrs. Slater has been sunk in the sorority swimming pool.

But better than the sense of humor, the film seems to express a point of view about its young collegiate characters. Here the sorority girls joke about cocaine, kill their house mother, and then cover up the crime. They're pretty rotten people (which I don't usually like in the slasher format), but some interesting points are scored here about the nature of our 1980s youth. The girls all get together and decide to *hide* the truth. They do so because—in a typical sign of 1980s morality—they come to the conclusion that it's okay to do what you must to win, to stay ahead. If this means bending the truth, so be it. If it means insider trading, that's okay. If it means sinking your house mother in the pool, then that's how it has to be. Nothing is going to stand in the way of "me" during the greed decade.

These girls empathize so little with Mrs. Slater (who is admittedly a nutball) that they attend a party after conspiring to hide the crime. Just as their new lives are about to begin, their old life comes roaring back to haunt them. That's part and parcel of the slasher format, but not many examples of the form so explicitly connect the mores of the 1980s to the characters.

In twisted fashion this is a morality tale that refuses to condone such behavior. Of course, in balancing the scales of justice, there's some gore (like a walking cane smashing somebody's eye). In another scene, a decapitated head shows up in a bloody toilet. It's the ultimate "just deserts," because to selfish co-eds, Mrs. Slater was dispensable, to be flushed away without a second thought.

Stylistically, *The House on Sorority Row* is adroit if not terribly original. It deploys, for instance, one of John Carpenter's best visual tricks from *Halloween* (1978). Specifically, the film stops forward momentum at

one important point to reveal flash cuts of locations where the slasher isn't. So we see empty rooms and such. This little montage builds up the anxiety as the audience wonders where the killer is hiding.

And then there's some good use of the frame in the final attic confrontation, with background and foreground alternating in significance, and an upper and lower level to the setting also playing an important role in the cat-and-mouse game between hunter and prey.

Finally, any movie that ends with the serial killer dressed as a clown is bound to terrify. And this movie ends that way.

The House Where Evil Dwells

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Doug McClure (Alex Curtis); Edward Albert (Ted Fletcher); Susan George (Laura); Mako Hattori (Otami); Amy Barrett (Amy); Toshiyuki Sasaki (Shigura); Toshiya Maru Yama (Masanori); Tsuyako Okajima (Witch); Henry Mitowa (Zen Monk); Maylimi Umeda (Noreka); Hiroko Takano (Wakako); Shuren Sakurai (Noh Mask Master).

CREW: A Martin B. Cohen Production. *Film Editor:* Barry Peters. *Art Director:* Yoshikazu Saho. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Music:* Ken Thorne. *Screenplay:* Robert Suhosky. *From the novel by:* James Hardiman. *Producer:* Martin B. Cohen. *Casting:* Mikiya Kashima. *Directed by:* Kevin Connor. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Demons and ghosts are not confined to your Christian world.”—A monk warns Ted Fletcher (Edward Albert) of an enveloping shroud of evil in *The House Where Evil Dwells*.

P.O.V.

“It isn’t my favorite film. The producers re-cut it after my version and lost much of the relationships, and making it a rather empty film.”—Director Kevin Connor assesses *The House Where Evil Dwells*.

SYNOPSIS: In 1840 in Kyoto, Japan, a samurai returns to his home unexpectedly and finds his wife in an assignation with another man. The samurai promptly murders the offenders with his sword, and then

commits suicide.

In the 1980s, a nice American family—the Fletchers—rents the house, which their friend, the American ambassador, Alex Curtis (McClure), has found for them. A zen monk from a nearby temple warns Ted Fletcher (Albert) that the house once belonged to the doomed lovers, and very soon three ghosts—karmically locked in an eternal triangle—re-appear. The ghost of the unfaithful wife begins to inhabit Ted's wife, Laura (George), and she initiates an affair with Alex, who becomes possessed by the ghost of the lover. The ghost of the wronged husband takes possession of Ted, making him overly harsh to his daughter Amy (Barrett), who is eventually hospitalized after a nocturnal attack by malevolent crabs. Finally, the triangle in the past is relived in the present with Alex, Ted and Laura all lurching unwittingly on their pre-ordained fates.

COMMENTARY: Kevin Connor's *The House Where Evil Dwells* opens with that not entirely uncommon 1980s plot element, the “deadly preamble,” as a cuckolded husband confronts his adulterous wife and her lover during a tryst at his home in 1800s Japan. Things turn bloody, and the avenger slices off his rival's arm, then head. He slits his wife's throat and then turns his sword on himself—all in glorious slow-motion photography.

It's a shocking (and graphic) opening to a variation on the *Innocents Abroad*-type horror film, also seen in the 1980 film, *Beyond Evil*. In this fashion of horror movie, contemporary Americans visiting a strange land become enmeshed in a haunting of non-Western origin. Because they don't understand the culture they are visiting, they also don't understand the nature of the threat imperiling them. Interestingly, in many of these films, it isn't just ignorance that dooms the American tourists, it's their obsession with “taking” something that doesn't belong to them, usually land or some other resource. In *The House Where Evil Dwells* (like *Beyond Evil*), finding “cheap” real estate and property comes at a high price.

Before long, as the Fletchers discover, the crimes of the past re-assert themselves in the present, as three ghosts become determined to relive their murderous triangle. As the film unfolds, the point is effectively made that fate can't be changed, and that the Fletchers, with McClure's character in tow as the last point of the triangle, are doomed, marching unawares towards an unpleasant destiny.

“This factor was well-covered in the book,” director Connor says of the *Innocents Abroad* subtext, “since Jim Hardiman was married to a

Japanese woman and had lived in the country and spoke the language, so this element was automatically in the script.”

What’s probably most interesting about the film is the manner in which Connor depicts the three Japanese ghosts. The spirits appear as if *superimposed* over the other actors, in the same setting (for instance a kitchen or a bedroom), but the Fletchers are unaware of their presence. It’s as though we are watching two separate realities coincide, one layered over the other.

Although this is a rather unconventional type of “ghost” visualization, and it could conceivably rob the film of its mysterious angles because we never question that the spirits are behind the events, the special effects work in the film’s favor. The ghosts are a ubiquitous presence, and their dark history repeats and repeats, like a film reel played *ad nauseum* over time. The way the ghosts appear superimposed over the consensus reality of the Fletchers, somehow reinforces this idea in visual terms.

There’s also an enthralling scene toward the end wherein young Amy Fletcher and her babysitter are inexplicably overrun by dozens of very large crustaceans while they sleep. These crabs chase Amy up a tree, and there’s a terror and tension to this sequence.

Finally, *The House Where Evil Dwells* deserves some kudos because it sticks to its guns and doesn’t offer a cop-out ending. Unlike *Beyond Evil*, where things turn out okay, here things happen pretty much as we expect. Fate can’t be changed and once the affair between Alex and Laura is set in motion, there’s nothing to be done. Ted decapitates Alex (in one of the most convincing head-severing scenes of the decade, along with *Night Warning*), stabs Laura and takes his own life.

End of story, but the predictability of the ending works in the film’s favor. As the movie spins its tale of inevitable fate, the pre-ordained conclusion gives the audience something to push back against. We wonder, is it possible to beat destiny? Can these characters, these *Innocents Abroad*, find their way out of the trap? It’s all the sadder that they can’t, since we see (which they can’t) the full-breadth of it.

CLOSE-UP: Directing *Where Evil Dwells*: Director Kevin Connor, the talent who had crafted the delightfully nasty *Motel Hell* (1980), first learned of *The House Where Evil Dwells* through his association with star Doug McClure, whom he had worked with on a series of Edgar Rice Burroughs fantasy adventure films in the 1970s, including *The Land That Time Forgot* (1975), *At the Earth’s Core* (1976) and *The*

People That Time Forgot (1977). Connor hadn't yet read the novel, but he knew the author, James Hardiman, whom he calls a "wonderful guy."

Connor remembers that shooting the film overseas in Japan was "very easy." When asked if there were any "lost-in-translation problems," Connor answers: "I personally didn't have any translation problems, but I know that the male Japanese crew didn't like taking orders from a female translator.

"I had an excellent cameraman, Jacques Haitkin," the director continues, "and the ghost sequences were the most tricky, but once we got the system down, it was fairly straightforward."

"In those days, we didn't have the intricate CGI systems. This was an old German technique called Shauftausen. But basically, you shoot the scene with one camera through a right-angled mirror. The ghost actors are on a black, velvet background so you can control the density of their image as you shoot, i.e., you fade them in and fade them out and line them up easily with the 'live' actors. It worked very well, and of course you could see the composite dailies the next day."

It was important to show the ghosts in this fashion because basically "it was an economical and effective process."

My favorite scene in *The House Where Evil Dwells* involves an attack on the Fletcher daughter by a squad of over-sized crabs. Connor remembers that scene well. "Well, I guess ghosts can conjure up whatever they like," he suggests, "and the crabs were in the script and available by the bucket load, so we went with that. I think it took half a day. There's only so much you can do with non-union crabs, and I think Amy was really scared."

A surprising element is the inclusion of several rather intense and explicit sex scenes. Connor was surprised too, because they weren't originally in the script.

"Interesting story about this," he notes, "is that the producers wanted a more graphic sex scene which wasn't in the script. So Edward Albert and Susan George agreed to do it on their terms, which was that Susan would wear her panties, because of an experience she had on *Straw Dogs* where somebody at the lab had copied some of the revealing outtakes from her nude scenes—so she certainly wasn't going to let that happen again. You can imagine how difficult it was to shoot a nude scene with both your leads wearing underwear, but it worked

out very well."

I asked Connor about the final decapitation scene, which still looks convincing today. "Yes, it was very effective," he agrees. "The Japanese makeup people made a very good model of the mold taken from the actor's head. It took a while to shoot since it was high speed, but it worked."

Humongous

★ ★

Critical Reception

"*Humongous* is a nightmarish, brooding horror movie that contains the germ of an interesting idea which has been aborted by tacky attempts to rip off every recent gory, splatter movie in memory ... The moody, artistic and mercifully dark photography is by Brian Hebb."—Linda Gross, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1982, Calendar, page 3.

"[A] modest, old-fashioned B-picture distinguished only by the director's Sidney Furie-like mannerisms ... Anyone with the slightest familiarity with the genre will have no trouble guessing the origins of the murdering monster, and Lynch is so busy having his unprepossessing teenagers run screaming into its arms that the film never achieves the combination of horror and poignancy found in, for example, *Death Line* or *The Funhouse*."—Kim Newman, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1983, page 215.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Janet Julian (Sandy Ralston); David Wallace (Eric Simmons); Janet Baldwin (Carla Simmons); John Wildman (Nick Simmons); Joy Boushel (Donna Blake); Shay Garner (Ida Parsons); Page Fletcher (Tom Rice); John McFadyen (Ed Parson); Garry Robbins (Ida's Son); Layne Coleman (Bert); Mary Sullivan (Ida).

CREW: A Stevenson/Kramreither Production of a Paul Lynch Film. **Music:** John Mills Cockell. **Film Editor:** Nick Rotundo. **Director of Photography:** Brian R.R. Hebb. **Supervising Art Director:** Carol Spier. **Art Director:** Barbara Dunphy. **Screenplay:** William Gray. **Executive Producer:** Michael M. Stevenson. **Producer:** Anthony Kramreither. **Casting:** Lucinda Sill. **Directed by:** Paul Lynch. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of young friends, including brothers and rivals Eric (Wallace) and Nicky (Wildman), take their yacht out on the lake around Dog Island. By night, they pick up Bert (Coleman), a fisherman whose boat has broken down; he warns them about the strange inhabitants of remote Dog Island.

When Nicky overtaxes the boat, a fire starts and all the crew, including Eric, Nicky, Bert, Carla (Baldwin), Donna (Boushel) and Sandy (Julian), evacuate and swim for shore. They find a boathouse and an old lodge on the island, the property of the wealthy Parsons family, lumber millionaires. They learn that this was the retreat of Ida Parsons, who gave birth to and nurtured a horribly deformed son.

Now that son is fully grown to gigantic proportions, and starving. This humongous threat sees the visitors as his next meal, and begins to kill the youngsters in horrible fashion, until only one survives.

COMMENTARY: The “No Trespassing” sign in the forest informs the viewer everything he or she needs to know about *Humongous*, a mountain man–slasher–style horror film from Paul Lynch, the director of the above-average *Halloween* knock-off, *Prom Night*.

Much of the film is so dark, it’s difficult to make out the details of what’s happening on-screen. Despite this flaw, the movie includes some moments that remain scarily effective, especially a final confrontation on a burning boat house.

Anthropophagus (1981) took the same setting as *Humongous* (an isolated island), the same characters (vacationers from a boat), the same kind of threat (a deranged psycho), and the same family history–mansion back story–locale and wove exploitation horror gold from the template, but *Humongous* doesn’t really measure up. The main characters aren’t very smart, they ignore the No Trespassing sign (and the fact that the mansion beyond is always depicted in cockeyed, menacing angles), as well as other indicators of danger, and so they get picked off. Sound familiar?

The film’s villain is a cursed wild man, a deformed child who has grown up brain-damaged and acromegalic. He’s running out of food on the island and does what he needs to in order to survive. Since he was raised by an affectionate mother and thinks fondly of her, the film’s final girl, Sandy, pulls an Amy Steel and pretends to be Mrs. Voorhees, ergh, she pretends to be *Humongous*’s deceased mother.

Before the film is over, spines are cracked like celery sticks and

decapitated heads float in the water like beach balls. Characters have smoked weed and at least one girl has revealed her breasts. Occasionally, just for good measure, the movie cuts to a point-of-view stalking shot. And the whole thing revolves around a transgression in the past.

Wait a minute ... which movie was I reviewing? *Humongous* is pretty darn undistinguished.

The Incubus

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“The film never really decided whether it wanted to be a satanic movie or a slasher movie or a mystery, and none of the many subplots, including one about Cassavetes accidentally killing his first wife, go anywhere.”—Darrell Moore, *The Best, Worst and Most Unusual: Horror Films*, Publications International, Ltd., 1983, page 150.

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Cassavetes (Dr. Sam Cordell); Kerrie Keane (Laura Kincaid); Helen Hughes (Agatha Galen); Erin Flannery (Jenny Cordell); Duncan McIntosh (Tim Galen); John Ireland (Hank Walden); Harvey Takin (Joe Prescott); Harry Ditson (Lt. Drivas); Mitch Martin (Mandy Pullman); Matt Birman (Roy Seeley); Beverly Cooper (Pru Keaton); Brian Young (Charlie Prescott); Barbara Franklin (Mrs. Pullman); Wes Lee (Mr. Pullman); Neil Dainard (Ernie); Jack Van Evera (Matt Davies); Jeames Beardin (Lacey); Dick McLean (*Incubus*).

CREW: A Stephen Friedman Presentation of a Marc Boyman Production in association with John M. Eckhart Productions, Ltd. *Casting:* Walker Bowen Inc., Film Extra Services. *From the novel by:* Ray Russell. *Film Editor:* George Appleby. *Music:* Stanley Myers. *Production Design:* Ted Watkins. *Director of Photography:* Albert J. Dunk. *Executive Producer:* Stephen Friedman. *Screenplay by:* George Franklin. *Produced by:* Marc Boyman, John M. Eckert. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dwayne McLean. *Directed by:* John Hough. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “It’s a nightmare. The same nightmare over and over again. And every time I dream, someone dies.”—Tim discusses his fear that his dreams may be materializing horrible, living nightmares, in *The Incubus*.

SYNOPSIS: In the town of Galen, at the home of Dr. Sam Cordell (Cassavetes) and his eighteen-year-old daughter, Jenny (Flannery), the supernatural is on the prowl. One night, Jenny's friend Roy (Birman) is found murdered and his girlfriend Mandy (Martin) raped, and suffering from a ruptured uterus.

The next day, the town museum curator is also raped and killed, her uterus discovered with a gruesome overabundance of red-tinged, non-human sperm. Before long, a farm is attacked and another whole family killed. The daughter, Jane, found raped in the shower.

Jenny's boyfriend, Tim Galen (McIntosh) comes to believe that he is the assailant, because he keeps experiencing nightmares about witches and a dungeon, and every time he dreams, another citizen dies.

Sam investigates and learns that Galen is not the true son of Agatha Galen (Hughes), one of the town's most prominent citizens. On the contrary, he was adopted by the Galen family when his mother was persecuted and murdered as a witch. Now Sam wonders if Tim could possibly have an evil doppelganger, or more likely, a sibling he doesn't know about—an *incubus*—a demon that can take form “through dreams and nightmares” and is driven to procreate with human beings.

COMMENTARY: A very sad, tired-looking John Cassavetes headlines as Dr. Sam Cordell in *The Incubus*, John Hough's mildly effective horror film concerning a devilish creature that rapes and murders in a small town harboring a secret.

In each vicious attack, crimson semen is left behind—inside the corpses—and Cassavetes, the noble, brilliant director of such films as *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and *Gloria* (1980), is forced to speak lines of dialogue such as “Intercourse was completed,” or repeatedly comment on a victim’s “overabundance of sperm” or “dry intercourse.”

Still, Cassavetes provides at least one great acting moment. Near the end, he chews his way through a sizable chunk of exposition, a monologue concerning the Galen family and a horror that began long ago, and was repeated thirty years in the past. Cassavetes wrangles this speech, internalizes the meaning, and literally becomes the dialogue in a mesmerizing, *tour-de-force* moment that not only captures audience attention like nothing else in the movie, but actually explains the virtually incomprehensible plot. He must have wanted to get off work early that day...

The remainder of *The Incubus* focuses on some very weakly portrayed teen characters trying to puzzle through a not-that-compelling mystery involving dreams of a dungeon, wherein a hooded torturer demands confession while someone scribbles madly in a book. This sleepy subplot alternates with several extremely violent, bloody murders that are staged with a modicum of skill.

The demonic Incubus attacks one character in a theater's toilet stall, for instance, a murder scene amusingly intercut with a rock 'n' roll movie playing in the auditorium.

However, the finest death is the one that occurs in the town's historical museum. The curator walks the main chamber of the facility, surrounded by figures of witches and library stacks when something horrible attacks. Slow motion photography is deployed as the curator is savagely raped amidst the mannequins, which stare blankly into space as the curator screams. This creates an interesting cause and effect dynamic. The curator screams for assistance, but those around her aren't really alive and are deaf to her shouts.

Another good and gory death sequence involves a sustained Incubus attack on a farm, in which a farmer gets a shovel in the neck (after blowing his toes off accidentally). The scene culminates in another rape, this time in the shower, and it's quite gory. Even the monster suit (not revealed in full for long) appears quite menacing during the "surprise" reveal and climax.

Yet despite scary interludes and even a little attempt at artistry—particularly in the film's book-end close-ups of an eyeball—*The Incubus* is more dull than exciting for long stretches, and the central mystery manages to generate almost no interest whatsoever, unless complicated, twisted lines of genealogy are a personal hobby. Also, intrepid horror fans will see the surprise twist at the end coming from a mile away.

Just Before Dawn

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Chris Lemmons (Jonathan); Gregg Henry (Warren); Debrow Benson (Constance/"Connie"); Ralph Seymour (Daniel); Mike Kellin (Ty); George Kennedy (Roy McLean); Jamie Rose (Meghan); Kati Powell (Merry Cat); Charles Bartlett (Vachel); John Hunsaker

(Mountain Twins); Hap Osland (Pa Logan); Barbara Spencer (Ma Logan).

CREW: Doro Vlado Hreljano Presents a Jeff Lieberman Film. *Directors of Photography:* Joel King, Dean King. *Film Editor:* Robert Lovett. *Art Director:* Craig Stearns. *Executive Producers:* Doro Vlado Hreljano, V. Paul Hreljanovic. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Dan Stillman. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Screenplay by:* Mark Arywitz, Gregg Irving. *Story by:* Joseph Middleton. *Produced by:* David Sheldon, Doro Vlado Hreljanovic. *Stunt Coordinator:* Steve Boyum. *Special Effects Makeup:* Matthew Mungle. *Special Effects:* John Morello. *Directed by:* Jeff Lieberman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Where we’re going is no summer camp,”—A confident camper warns his buddies about their treacherous mountain destination in director Jeff Lieberman’s *Just Before Dawn*.

SYNOPSIS: A mountain man goes on a killing spree in the remote woods, at a church with a cemetery. Meanwhile, a group of young adults on an outing head up into that remotest section of mountains, over the objections of the local ranger, McLean (Kennedy).

Once isolated, the campers, including Warren (Henry) and Constance (Brown), encounter a survivor of the earlier massacre and they mistake the rambling man for a crazy. The campers continue deeper into the forest, even crossing a dangerous (and narrow) suspension bridge. The killer—and *his* twin!—are stalking them, killing the campers one at a time. Finally, it’s up to Connie to defeat the monster in the dead of night and she does so ... by shoving her fist right down the assailant’s throat and choking him with it.

COMMENTARY: Stupid city-slickers go to the country and encounter real terror in *Just Before Dawn*, a better-than-average representation of the slasher paradigm, only this entry involves a monstrous mountain man or two as the antagonist(s).

The young adults visiting the mountains litter, play practical jokes on one another and generally misbehave badly enough to merit brutal punishment. A Cassandra-like crazy old coot tries to warn them away from the region, but they don’t heed him. Useless authority in the film is represented by George Kennedy, a forest ranger who would rather play with his favorite plants, and who arrives too late to save many of the endangered kids. The final girl is Connie, who at first feels childish because she expresses vulnerability about being in the woods. Obviously, she’s the only one of the group with a lick of sense. Taking

a page from *The Hills Have Eyes*, there's also a young, wild girl who may have information concerning the terror nearby.

It isn't for these commonly seen elements that *Just Before Dawn* merits its high rating. Rather, it's because director Jeff Lieberman proves surprisingly skilled at staging his attack sequences. One of the creepiest moments involves Meghan and Jonathan cavorting about in a natural lake. Jonathan disappears beneath the surface and comes up again, scaring his girlfriend. They play and laugh, but in a fine use of the long shot, Lieberman reveals the menacing mountain man in the background. Unnoticed in the mist of the waterfall, he slips into the water.

In a diabolically inventive moment, Meghan continues to play in the murky water and a hand reaches up from the depths to grab her. Of course, she thinks the limb belongs to her beau, but then in a distinctly macabre moment, she spies Jonathan on a distant shore. All of a sudden, awareness hits ... there's someone else in the water. This moment is positively chilling.

Lieberman is particularly good at utilizing backgrounds in such deep-focus shots. For instance, when Connie and Warren indulge in some horseplay in the creek, they're depicted in the foreground of the frame. Behind them at some distance, Jonathan's corpse rolls down a waterfall. It's a repeat of the earlier trick using the same set-up, but the punchline is different and the staging still accomplishes the goal.

Another ominous surprise comes later. In a twist few audiences will see coming, a second killer is revealed. The moment of the big reveal carries some real horrific heft and like the rest of the movie, this portion of the largely predictable tale suggests a feeling of unpredictability. The expert set-ups, the lack of big name stars and feeling that anything can happen grants *Just Before Dawn* a good sense of danger.

The film's final battle is utterly brutal and bears comparison to the savage cinema of the 1970s. Connie goes round the bend and after the final chase rams her fist and forearm down a mountain man's throat, all the way up to her elbow. I've never seen anything like this in a horror movie and I wanted to applaud. It is simultaneously ridiculous and wonderful.

In some ways, this modest film with a familiar plot is more inventive stylistically than any of the *Friday the 13th* films, so it's a welcome addition to the slasher school.

The Killing Hour
(a.k.a. *The Clairvoyant*)
★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Perry King (Paul McCormick); Elizabeth Kemp (Virna Nightbourne); Norman Parker (Detective Larry Weeks); Kenneth McMillan (Cullum); Jon Polito (Sporaco); Joe Morton (Rich); Barbara Quinn (Muriel); Antone Pagan (Gonzales); Thomas De Carlo (Teddy Gallagher); Lou Bedford (Werner Armstrong); David Ramsey (Burt Johnson); Tom Stechschulte (Jim Deardon); Louisa Flanagan (Leanna); Olivia Negron (Betty Mercer); Helena Carroll (Bag Lady).

CREW: *Presented by:* Lansbury/Beruh Productions. *Director of Photography:* Larry Pizer. *Film Editor:* David E. McKenna. *Assistant Director:* Costa Mantis. *Music:* Alexander Peskanov. *Art Director:* Susan Kaufman. *Screenplay:* B. Jonathan Ringkamp. *Story:* B. Jonathan Ringkamp, Armand Mastroianni. *Associate Producer:* Nan Pearlman. *Executive Producers:* Edgar Lansbury, Joseph Beruh. *Producer:* Robert Di Milia. *Directed by:* Armand Mastroianni. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The mysterious “Hand-Cuff Killer” terrorizes New York City after a woman is found dead (and cuffed) in the Hudson River. While Channel 6’s *Talk Back* host, the charismatic Paul McCormick (King), tries to make big ratings out of the crime, detective (and stand-up comedian) Larry Weeks (Parker) tries to solve the crime.

Torn between her affection for these men, Virna Nightbourne (Kemp) is an art student and clairvoyant who experiences visions of the horrible murders and sketches them for the police. After Virna appears on *Talk Back*, the killer pursues and murders her best friend, Muriel, and then sets his sights on her. While Virna hides out in McCormick’s apartment, Weeks puts the pieces of the puzzle together using Virna’s sketches, and finally uncovers the identity of the killer.

COMMENTARY: Horror movies are really all about *death*. In horror movies, there’s a level of cathartic emotion involved in seeing on-screen characters pursued and killed, or even make good their escapes. When watching genre films, audiences feel as though they’ve run the gauntlet. They’ve escaped or cheated death! That’s important, because the greatest human fear is something inevitable. Death will

claim everybody, and one just hopes that when it does come, we won't see it coming, or that—if we do—we'll be able to evade it for a time.

In a horror film, the deaths of protagonists might feel remote if one doesn't care about them. They may feel immediate if the opposite is true, and they may be gory. But few films successfully capture the total and utter fear (and anticipation) involved when a character understands that death is absolutely inevitable and must wait seconds, even minutes for the fatal blow to come. An obscure 1980s psychic thriller called *The Killing Hour* gets this feeling absolutely right.

The murder scenes are sadistic and diabolical, and in some fashion, they anticipate the game-playing murderer Jigsaw in *Saw* (2004). In particular, every single murder is staged to wring maximum terror from the prospective victim. There's an element of anticipation and then panic as each trapped person realizes that escape is impossible.

The murder that opens *The Killing Hour* is a good example. It involves a swimmer doing laps at an indoor pool. Without warning, the killer cuffs one of the swimmer's feet to the bottom rung of a ladder on one side. Then the lights go off, leaving the man to swim alone in an eerie, crimson light, the water like blood. He's cuffed, so he can't surface to get air. He's literally millimeters from the surface, able to see it and stretch for it, but absolutely unable to reach it. So he drowns ... not even inches away from salvation. It's tension-provoking in a clever way. The audience later learns that the swimmer's ankle was nearly ripped apart in his struggle to get one good breath of air.

All the murders fit this pattern. The next crime involves a man who is handcuffed to the bottom of an elevator shaft. He also struggles to break free, and is able to watch the descent of the elevator that will eventually crush him. Again, the feeling of anticipation, of being powerless to stop one's own demise, transmits loud and clear.

The third death involves a woman named Muriel. She too is handcuffed (seeing a motif here?). In this case, she awakes to find her hands bound to a driving wheel in a moving car. She must watch helplessly as she and the vehicle careen through a wall, into the water. The car sinks, and Muriel drowns ... conscious the whole time, locked in a trap with no escape.

The Killing Hour does an outstanding job with all these scenes, but much less so with the police procedural aspects of the story. The lead cop is tremendously annoying. He's a stand-up comedian who does terrible imitations of Woody Allen and George Burns and the movie

could have done without this aspect of the character. Also, it's not difficult to determine the identity of the killer once the question has been asked: Who has the most to gain from these deaths?

The resolution of the crimes relies on a vivid, graphic flashback of group sex in a hotel room. It's a surprisingly vigorous scene, and one that nicely brings every element of the story (including those oft-seen handcuffs) together. You may be surprised by who is involved, or you may see it coming, but you won't take your eyes off the film.

Since much of *The Killing Hour* involves tabloid TV (and a program called *Talk Back*), it's appropriate that a scandalous topic like group sex should prove so important to the resolution of the mystery. In 1984, tabloid TV was still in its infancy (Geraldo and Morton Downey Jr. hadn't quite achieved their apex of fame yet) and thus the film would have seemed shocking. The culture is inured to tabloid TV today, post-Jerry Springer, so this element of *The Killing Hour* has lost some of its pizzazz. Still, this is a surprisingly solid suspense film with some elaborate horror sequences. Ultimately the psychic angle, which frankly seems piped in from *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978), is less important than the killer's sadism and intelligently designed mousetraps.

Madman

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"The murders are, from an aesthetic standpoint, as unimaginative as those in any part of *Friday the 13th*. But Marz—who recalls the scraggly Glenn Strange in *The Mad Monster*—has an amusing lopé and grunt and until the end, we are granted only quick, tantalizing peeks at him."—Donald C. Willis, *Horror and Science Fiction Films III*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984, pages 168–69.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Alexis Dubin (Betsy); Tony Fish (T.P.); Harriet Bass (Stacy); Seth Jones (Dave); Jan Claire (Ellie); Alex Murphy (Bill); Jimmy Steele (Richie); Carl Fredericks (Max); Michael Sullivan (Dippy); Paul Ehlers (Madman Marz); Tom Veilleux (Tommy); Stephen Clark (Timmy); Vicki Kenneally (Mary Ellen); Shelley Mathes (Shirley); Lorie Mathes (Joannie); Jane Pappidas (Marz's Wife); Travis Sawyer (Marz's Son); Deidre Higgins (Marz's Daughter).

CREW: The Legend Lives Company Presents A Gary Sales/Joe Gannone Production. *Executive Producer:* Sam Marion. *Director of Photography:* James Momel. *Art Director:* William Scheck. *Film Editor:* Dan Loewenthal. *Makeup:* Joe Hansen. *Wardrobe Designer:* Paulette Aller. *Sound:* William Meredith. *Music Director:* Gary Sales. *Electronic Music:* Stephen Horelick. *Story by:* Joe Giannone, Gary Sales. *Producer:* Gary Sales. *Special Effects Makeup:* Jo Hansen. “*Song of Madman Marz*” by: Gary Sales. *Written and Directed by:* Joe Giannone. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At a summer camp, head counselor Max (Fredericks) tells his campers the story of a local legend, about an axe murderer named Madman Marz who reputedly lives in a dilapidated house nearby in the woods. Supposedly, Madman attacks (and decapitates or hangs) anyone who dare speak his name aloud.

That's precisely what occurs and soon the deranged old Marz, a white-haired monstrosity with claw-like finger-and toe-nails, begins stalking the camp counselors. The likable T.P. (Fish) is hanged in the woods, his buddy Bill is decapitated by Madman's axe, and poor Stacy (Bass) gets her head ripped off while looking under the hood of her car. Stalwart Betsy (Dubin) is left to save the young campers, and she sees them safely away on a bus before confronting Madman Marz in his creepy old house.

COMMENTARY: *Madman* starts with a scene that's common in the slasher film paradigm, but here it's dramatized in an original manner, and that makes it fun. Young campers and their counselors alike are huddled around the flickering flames of a campfire, surrounded by darkest night. Suddenly this moment is cross-cut with shots of the self-same campers being dragged, chased and murdered.

This “flash forward” is not only creepy, but it grants the film (and the massacre) a concrete, dread-filled sense of inevitability. The audience is shown right from the outset that these campers are going to experience a very bad night. One might expect that in a horror film, revealing which characters are going to die would ruin the suspense. However, considering the slasher formula, that's not necessarily so. The paradigm is commonly used and so clearly understood that most audiences can probably determine, down to a person, which characters will live and die. What's unique about the slasher paradigm—and *Madman* gets credit for seeming to understand this—is how they die, and how the movie itself plays with the slasher formula and its inherent expectations. In 2005, *Cry-Wolf* adopted the same technique.

Most of the faceless slashers of the 1980s are unstoppable forces, like a hurricane or tornado. Once these killers set their sights on a victim, it's all over but the crying. Suspense is generated not so much by who dies, but how and when they die. Proximity is an important part of that equation, and *Madman* has good fun with the notion. For example, a mousy character named Ellie leads Madman Marz on a merry chase, and even—at one nail-biting moment—hides in a refrigerator. But the suspense really builds when the killer and the victim are in the same shot, sharing the same space in the frame.

Final girl Betsy goes to Madman Marz's house of horrors and the same equation is vetted. She stands in the foreground, in low light, while in the background, Madman Marz stalks her in the dark ... just a shadow moving. The fact that the audience has a knowledge of the antagonist's position that the protagonist isn't aware of, makes it scary.

In terms of the slasher paradigm, *Madman* has fun with the genre. The opening campfire scene reveals Madman's murder of his family and then subsequent hanging. Richie throws a rock through a window at Marz's house, thus furnishing the necessary transgression for a new crime spree, and the organizing principle of the summer camp (where have we seen that before?) provides us the victims (the counselors and campers), the location (the woods), and the opportunity to reveal the deadly crime in the past (the campfire).

There's also a *coup de grâce* (a decapitation under the hood of a car), a final chase (with Ellie) and even the requisite tour of the dead as the corpses of the counselors are displayed like trophies. The killer is uniformed in a weird sort of way, with his overalls and long white hair, and his weapon is an axe he plucks out of a tree stump as though he were King Arthur removing Excalibur.

Where the film diverges from the common formula is in its lack of red herrings. The audience understands all along that Madman Marz is the villain. And also, Betsy, the film's final girl, doesn't survive her match with Marz. Like many later final girls or heroic females (including Ripley in *Aliens* and Kirsty in *Hellbound*), she is instead provided wards to protect, namely young campers. She gives her life doing so, but only on rare occasions in the slasher paradigm (including *The Dorm that Dripped Blood* [1981]) is the final girl slain by the monster.

Filled with impenetrable night time shots, gory moments and dominated by a memorably murderous cretin, *Madman* is actually a good entry in the slasher sweepstakes although some may argue it's a

Mountain Man variation (like *Just Before Dawn* [1982] or *The Prey* [1984]) rather than strictly a slasher. Still, the film achieves its frisson by playing with the slasher paradigm, and having some fun with it right out of the gate. *Madman* is so canny about its style, about its placement of the killer in the frame with his quarry, that it's surprising to find some really terrible scenes in the film too.

For instance, there's an utterly bizarre love scene between T.P. (Tony Fish) and Betsy (Alexis Dubin), set in a hot tub. Once they're in the water, after the obligatory strip scene, these would-be lovers dance around each other, spinning around the perimeter of the tub in the water as if they're ice-skaters or something. Then they lock hands and the love scene begins in earnest. But it's just downright strange, the prelude to the lovemaking. It's very stagey, artificial (and funny), and not at all like the remainder of the film.

Also, how can a real horror aficionado not love a movie that ends with a folk song about the title character. In this case, that ballad is "The Song of Madman Marz" (by G. Sales) and it's strangely catchy but oh so campy.

Mausoleum

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Marjoe Gortner (Oliver Farrell); Bobbie Bresee (Susan Farrell); Norman Burton (Dr. Simon Andrews); La Wanda Page (Else); Maurice Sherbanee (The Gardener/Ben); Laura Hippe (Aunt Cora); Sheri Mann (Dr. Roni Logan); Julie Christy Murray (Young Susan); Chu Chu Malave (Delivery Boy); Ron Cannon (Gallery Owner); Joel Kramer (Tramp in Mausoleum); Gene Edwards (Drunken Nightclub Patron); Di Ann Monaco (Girl in Nightclub); John Branigan (Parking Attendant); Blake Barich (Little Girl); Bill Vail (Final Demon).

CREW: A Motion Picture Marketing Release, Weston International Pictures/A Robert Barich Film. *Written and Produced by:* Robert Barich, Robert Madero. *Art Director:* Robert Burns. *Music:* James Mendoza-Nava. *Director of Photography:* Robert Barich. *Executive Producers:* Jerry Zimmerman, Michael Franzese. *Associate Producers:* Horst Osterkamp, Arline Moh. *Special Effects Makeup Created by:* John Buechler. *Directed by:* Michael Dugan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

INCANTATION: "You must use the crown of thorns. It will neutralize

the possession.”—A word to the wise in *Mausoleum*.

SYNOPSIS: After her mother dies, young Susan (Murray) feels drawn to the Nomed family tomb in a creepy graveyard. Years later, a fully grown Susan (Bresee) is undergoing psychiatric care, and her doctor (Burton) learns that the curse of her family is such that any woman who enters the Nomed mausoleum is doomed to be possessed by a demon. When this occurs, Susan begins luring men like Ben the gardener (Sherbanee) and a delivery boy (Malave) to their deaths with the promise of sex.

Becoming more a demon all the time, Susan kills her husband (Gortner), but her psychiatrist learns that he can free Susan and reverse the process by placing a crown of thorns upon the demon’s head. To do so involves great risk, but Andrews is determined to cure Susan of her all her demons, psychiatric and otherwise.

COMMENTARY: *Mausoleum*, a virtual remake of Herb Freed’s less-than-stellar 1980 production *Beyond Evil*, makes literal the popular psychological notion of “confronting your inner demon.” In this case, a traumatized woman, played by the luscious Bobbie Bresee, suffers from the weight of a childhood trauma and finds herself “acting out,” actually possessed by a demon; one who—not coincidentally—expresses her wild, sexual side. In this case, the demon forces Bresee’s character, Susan, to reject her husband and seduce strangers, including a hunky gardener.

There’s something pertinent here about sexual repression, desire, monogamy and marriage. In one scene set at a disco club, Susan is virtually assaulted on the dance floor by a lecherous man who wants to make her his partner. She responds to his advances with hostility, by making his car explode into flames ... with the offender inside. The message is clear: Don’t cross Susan. She is a seductress, but also a punisher. ... which, one could argue, makes her a Gothic heroine: alluring and repulsive, sexy and evil, all at the same time.

In fact, one might even make the argument that the often-described “Curse of the Nomed Women” is actually menstrual in nature. Susan is a perfectly normal woman sometimes, but then all of a sudden she becomes a raving, demonic madwoman. At times (as with the gardener), she’s receptive to male sexual advances. At other times, watch out—little demon heads form over her nipples and bite her husband to death. As Oliver learns the hard way, it’s apparently that time of the month.



Gorgeous Bobbie Bresee stands beside a poster for her 1983 demonic possession movie, *Mausoleum* (1982).

Perhaps the description above makes it sound as though *Mausoleum* is a good or even artfully made film. It's neither. For instance, La Wanda Page appears as Else, the African-American housekeeper, and her character is an alarming racial stereotype, appearing only for comic relief, mumbling things like "I ain't been this nervous since I been black!" The special effects are all terrible too. even laughable. For instance, at one point the upstairs hallway of the Farrell house is suddenly and mysteriously suffused with a green smoke, and one has to wonder if it was caused by demonic lactose intolerance. Certainly, there's no other explanation given in the film.

Most laughable of all, however, is the easy, nearly instructional manner in which the way to defeat the demon is revealed. "You must use the crown of thorns. It will neutralize the possession," Simon the therapist is told. Things don't get much more explicit than that unless a diagram is provided.

In the end, the real reason to see *Mausoleum* is to catch a gander of lovely Bobbie Bresee cavorting about in see-through white nightgowns, coming on to strangers and then turning into a demon. If that sounds like your scene, you may like this movie.

Parasite



Critical Reception

"Alien (1979) meets *Mad Max* (1979) meets Cronenberg's *The Parasite Murders* (1974) ... Narrative logic has little purchase on this cheaply assembled universe, where eye-strain effects are all..."—Phil Hardy, *The Film Encyclopedia Volume II: Science Fiction*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984, page 377.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Glaudini (Paul Dean); Demi Moore (Patricia Welles); Luca Bercovici (Ricus); James Davidson (Merchant); Al Fann (Collins); Tom Villard (Zeke); Scott Thompson (Chris); Cherie Currie (Dana); Vivian Blaine (Elizabeth Daley); James Cavan (Buddy); Joanelle Romero (Bo); Freddie Moore (Arn); Natalie May (Shell); Cheryl Smith (Captive Girl); Joel Miller (Town Punk).

CREW: Embassy Pictures presents an Irwin Yablans, Charles Band production. *Stereovision 3-D camera and optics design by:* Chris J.

Condon. *3-D Consultant*: Randall Larson. *Casting*: Johanna Ray. *Film Editor*: Brad Arensman. *Associate Producers*: Richard Marcus, Michael Wolf. *Production Supervisor*: J. Larry Carroll. *Director of Photography*: Mac Ahlberg. *Production Associate*: Alan J. Adler. *Parasite effects designed and created by*: Stan Winston, James Kagel, Lance Anderson. *Special Effects*: Doug White. *Music*: Richard Band. *Stunt Coordinator*: Harry Wowchuk. *Executive in Charge of Production*: Joseph Wolf. *Written by*: Alan J. Adler, Michael Shoob, Frank Levering. *Executive Producer*: Irwin Yablans. *Produced and Directed by*: Charles Band. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 85 minutes.

P.O.V.

“The movie fantasy of yesterday is now the terrifying film experience of the future. For technical reasons, the preview you are about to see is not three-dimensional. Be assured, *Parasite* is the most gripping and frightening movie you will ever see ... And in 3-D you will be part of the terror.”—From the trailer for *Parasite*.

SYNOPSIS: In a post-apocalyptic United States, Dr. Paul Dean (Glaudini) drives out to the nearly abandoned desert town of Joshua (population: 64) to continue his research involving a deadly parasitic creature. To Dean’s dismay, he is already infected with one such parasite—which is growing in his abdomen—and he hopes that by studying a stolen specimen of another, he will be able to determine a way to cure himself.

Once in Joshua, Dean runs afoul of a local gang run by angry ex-work camp slave Ricus (Bercovici), and befriends a kindly young woman who grows lemons, Patricia (Moore). Meanwhile, a “Merchant” (Davidson)—an evil businessman-mercenary—also arrives in Joshua looking for Dr. Dean and his parasite, determined to bring back the government property.

Ricus and his gang steal the container with the parasite inside, and the monster attaches itself to Zeke (Villard), Ricus’s buddy, and kills him. Before long, the creature has also killed Ricus’s girl, Dana (Currie), and runs rampant in a small hotel, burrowing inside the kindly old proprietor, Miss Daley (Blaine). Dean and Patricia determine that high frequency sound waves might kill the monster, but first they must capture the loose parasite and test which frequency can kill it. Naturally, the Merchant isn’t keen on the idea of destroying government property, and there is a confrontation between man, merchant, and parasite.

COMMENTARY: The 1980s gave the world many post-apocalyptic horror films. Perhaps one of the most notable is *Parasite*, a 3-D film spotlighting a monster that is literally all mouth and teeth.

Oh, and a young Demi Moore, as the former “Little Miss Lemon Grove of 1992”...

Parasite’s future is a world where gasoline is \$40.57 a gallon, where silver is the preferred currency, where inflation is rampant, and government work camps keep people employed, or rather enslaved. Youth gangs roam in the wilderness outside the cities, and the world is still suffering greatly after a nuclear war. Instead of an enlisted military, the government employs private “merchants” as henchmen, angels of death who combine the skills of assassins with the morals of corporate businessmen.

Of course, all of this material can be read as a terse response to the radical Reagan agenda, both in foreign policy (nuclear brinkmanship) and economics (the working class actually becomes the enslaved service class as the rich grow richer). But the movie’s real goal is simply to frighten and repulse.



A bloody moment from the 3-D film *Parasite* (1982), as the titular creature locks onto to an unfortunate victim.

In that regard, the bloody special effects and 3-D gore come in quite handy. There's a 3-D snake attack, a 3-D hypodermic needle pointed at the camera, and that very fat 3-D slug with rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth. Some scenes are actually fairly tense, including the one involving the parasite eating a little old lady and then getting loose (but hiding from view) in her boarding home. It's a common fear—the idea of a small monster (like a lizard or tarantula) hidden under the bed, and *Parasite* exploits it for maximum terror. The parasite bursts out of the woman's head and lunges right at the camera in a true gross-out moment.

Parasite is also punctuated by frequent and dramatic fade-outs, as though a commercial break is expected, but a TV showing of the film would have been unlikely, given the film's gore quotient. Otherwise, like *Blood Kill, Rats* and other post-apocalyptic horrors of the 1980s, *Parasite* tends to look cheap, and even a little silly today. Some characters carry laser weapons that shoot green beams (an unlikely eventuality, given the state of the world's economy in the film), and for a while, the parasite is stored in what appears to be a coffee thermos. If anything, *Parasite* is remembered today for its over-the-top bloody attacks, and the presence of Ms. Moore, who doesn't do her reputation any harm here.

Poltergeist



Critical Reception

“[T]he most sensational ghost story since Wise’s *The Haunting*. If your nerves can stand the pounding Hooper gives them in this film, they’ll be up to anything. With one superbly engineered shock after another, the film also has tremendous special effects that make it a really frightening experience.”—David Quindlan, *The Illustrated Guide to Film Directors*, Barnes and Noble Books, 1983, page 145.

“...thrilling, frightening at times, eerily beautiful ... As a cinematic experience, it far surpasses something as conventional as *The Amityville Horror*.”—David Denby, “Spielberg’s Duo of Supernatural Winners,” *House & Garden*, August 1982, page 12.

“Narrative flaws are mitigated ... by the film’s sheer momentum, its

technical virtuosity, and the convention that the horror film need not always explain cause and effect.”—Marc Mancini, *Magill’s Cinema Annual 1983*, page 266.

“Did Hooper direct or did Spielberg? Who cares? America ate this movie up. They missed a perfect opportunity for a great laugh—James Karen, the ‘Pathmark Man’ to shoppers in much of the United States, known for his ‘Why Pay More?’ slogan, didn’t get to say that when Craig T. Nelson badgered him for moving headstones but not bodies from a cemetery. Oh well. If you’ve seen a lot of horror films, good and bad, from the ’30s to the ’70s, this movie wrapped up lots of different clichés, put a kind of summer blockbuster spin on it, and made an exciting film that isn’t really scary. The clown doll? That’s scary. The tree outside the window? That’s scary. The rest of the film is really action-thriller-summer-blockbuster with ghosts. Compare this film to something like *The Haunting* or *The Changeling*. No offense to the late maestro, but Jerry Goldsmith scored this film—it’s a blockbuster, not a horror film. That formula would re-appear in *Van Helsing* and *The Mummy*. Scares chill the soul, while adrenaline warms the muscles. Maybe it’s possible to come up with the right balance of these two. Maybe *Jaws* did that. Maybe parts of *Alien* did that. *Poltergeist* did not—it’s fluff.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“Hurray! A ghost movie that is really scary. Spielberg’s script unveils a slow build toward the pay-off, with amusement at the supernatural pranks giving way to unrestrained creeps.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Craig T. Nelson (Steve Freeling); Jo Beth Williams (Diane Freeling); Beatrice Straight (Dr. Lesh); Dominique Dunne (Dana Freeling); Oliver Robbins (Robbie Freeling); Heather O’Rourke (Carol Anne Freeling); Michael McManus (Ben Tuthill); Virginia Kiser (Mrs. Tuthill); Martin Casella (Marty); Richard Lawson (Ryan); Zelda Rubinstein (Tangina); James Karen (Mr. Teague); Lou Perry (Pugsley); Dirk Blocker (Jeff Shaw); Clair Leucart (Bulldozer); Allan Graff (Sam); Joseph R. Walsh (Joey); Helen Baron (Woman Buyer); Neal Conlon (Husband); Robert Broyles (Pool Worker #1); Sonny Landham (Pool Worker #2).

CREW: MGM Presents a Tobe Hooper film, a Steven Spielberg Production. *Casting:* Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Marci Liroff. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Director of Photography:* Matthew Leonetti. *Film*

Editor: Michael Kahn. *Production Designer:* James H. Spencer. *Visual Effects:* Richard Edlund. *Producer:* Kathleen Kennedy. *Story:* Steven Spielberg. *Screenplay:* Steven Spielberg, Michael Grais, Mark Victor. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 115 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In suburban California, in the sub-division of tract homes called Questa Verde, little Carol Anne Freeling (O'Rourke) alarms her typical middle-class American family by conversing with what she terms “the TV people.” Soon, after what seems like a midnight earthquake (but which is actually centered on their house), the Freelings awake to hear Carol Ann declare—ominously—“They’re here.”

Before long, the family is being menaced by playful but increasingly angry and vengeful spirits. An old tree practically devours the Freeling boy, Robbie (Robbins), during a tornado, and Carol Ann is pulled into a vortex and disappears into her closet. The Freelings, (Williams and Nelson) seek professional help from a psychologist, Dr. Lesh (Straight), and her associates, who are astonished by the power of the spirits inhabiting the house.

A medium named Tangina (Rubinstein) represents the family’s only hope of freeing Carol Anne from “the other side,” where a monstrous “Beast” is using her to prevent other spirits from attaining spiritual enlightenment and peace in “The Light.” With Tangina’s help, Mom Diane ventures into the spectral world to rescue her missing daughter, but this is only the beginning of the terror in store for the family. It is the father, Steve, a real estate agent working for a corrupt company, who will discover the secret behind the dangerous haunting.

COMMENTARY: In an unusual irony, the supernatural thriller *Poltergeist* is probably the best known of all Tobe Hooper’s films. Yet, those who do know the film tend to associate the film not with Hooper, but with its producer-writer, Steven Spielberg. Even the *TV Guide* blurb credits the film to Spielberg, reinforcing the idea that it is his film. Though ownership of *Poltergeist* is much debated, in the final analysis the film is a terrifying concoction of horror thrills and chills that, upon close inspection, more closely resembles the work of Hooper than it does the film fantasies of Spielberg.



Diane Freeling (Jo Beth Williams) on the ceiling in *Poltergeist* (1982).

If someone were to ask this author to give just one argument why *Poltergeist* feels like a Hooper film, not a Spielberg one, it would be simple to pinpoint the central point of debate: tone. In addition to being a balls-out horror film, *Poltergeist* is, on a deeper level, satire about American values in general and the role of TV in our society in particular. Spielberg is a gifted filmmaker to be certain, a wonder even. But a satirist he is not. Spielberg is a *sincere* filmmaker. His work is usually apolitical (or politically correct, at least before *Munich* [2005]) and very much “on the nose,” not humorous jibes at real-life people, politics or trends. If he wants to issue a valuable societal point about the treatment of veterans (*Saving Private Ryan* [1998]), slavery (*Amistad* [1998]) or the Holocaust (*Schindler’s List* [1994]) he directs

an accomplished, emotionally honest motion picture revolving around the very serious topic of choice.

Similarly, *E.T.* (1982) is a straight-faced film about boyhood friendships, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) an “on the nose” (though droll) updating and cherishing of 1930s cliffhangers. Yet *Poltergeist* is a different animal. Like another Spielberg-produced film, *Gremlins* (directed by Joe Dante), it is blatantly and unabashedly satirical. It is a film that, without reservation, equates the television with evil. To state the matter succinctly, the TV gets turned on in the Freeling house and promptly exposes the family to evil. The first and the last images of the film involve television as a portal for terror and the Freelings’ last act before the end credits roll is to kick the offending TV set out of their motel room!

Poltergeist commences with an extreme close-up of a television. The set is playing the National Anthem, but the images are not pristine, not clear. United States icons like Old Glory and the capitol building are seen as grainy and indistinct and then they change, devolving to static almost at once. Later in the film, the playing of the National Anthem on television recurs, undeniably tying TV and America together in a tight bond. This union seems to indicate that America’s future, in Hooper’s eyes, is as a TV-obsessed nation. Liberty, freedom, and ideals have become fuzzy, blurred (like the static-ritten picture) before the unblinking eye of a TV that sells fast food, cars and other items twenty-four hours a day. The metaphor extends even to the Freelings: Mr. Freeling wants to sell real estate and get rich, regardless of what demographic (the spirits of the dead!) he might have to trample to make his fortune. His name even indicates his very nature. He is a *Freeling*, someone who believes his success and wealth have come at no price whatsoever.

This satirical undercurrent is an important facet of *Poltergeist*’s narrative tapestry and it is not likely one envisioned by Spielberg. In his work as a director, he rarely, if ever, speaks with tongue in cheek and he *never* bites the hand that feeds him. Consider that *Poltergeist*, in its indictment of television and 1980s consumer culture (i.e. the yuppie mentality), runs totally counter to the mentality that would permit such blatant product placement in a work of art (Reeses Pieces and *E.T.*—perfect together!).

Contrarily, Hooper has always utilized horror films as a vehicle for satire. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was in some ways about the gas shortage and job layoffs of the early 1970s. *The Funhouse* concerned the adverse impact of bad (but profitable) “dead” teenager movies so

popular at the time of the film's release. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* satirized yuppies and small business owners, and *Invaders from Mars* equated the "don't worry, be happy" 1980s with the conformist 1950s. The mode of *Poltergeist*, satire, is therefore Hooper's typical manner of expression.



It knows what scares you. Steven Freeling (Craig T. Nelson) holds on to a life-line to "the other side" during a climactic moment during *Poltergeist*.

It is no coincidence in *Poltergeist* that the strobing light of the television is constantly reflected on the face of the film's principals, and that the self-same coloring and lighting scheme is used to render the closet-doorway to the nether region. Both the blue light in the closet and the blue light of the TV set represent the same thing: portals to places that can steal your children away. Both venues can overtake your life and both can be evil. The only way to rid one's self of the nasty spirits is to throw off your "tainted" material wealth (your house, your belongings, your television set) and reject the values of a culture obsessed with greed. That's why the final images of *Poltergeist* are so important: A family is reunited and their first act, post-

haunting, is to kick the TV to the curb. They have no TV now, no house in the suburbs, no corporate sponsors. What they do have, at long last, is family togetherness. Freedom, as a song in *Team America* (2004) reminds us, isn't free.

Again, there is no precedent for such veiled commentary in the works of Steven Spielberg. If anything, his films (particularly *Close Encounters* and *E.T.*) seem to laud the middle-class American lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. As film scholar Morris Dickstein wrote in *Love and Hisses: Steven Spielberg and George Lucas on Peter Panavision*:

The suburban worlds of these [Spielberg] movies strikes me as dim, stereotyped, and pretty much interchangeable. He loves suburbia too much to examine it closely ... his vision of the nuclear family, presided by loving guardians, is not far removed from *Father Knows Best*.¹⁴

Casting blame on the middle class for the greed and business practices of corporations, *Poltergeist* is pretty serious business, even harsh. Hardly the stuff of an artist who admires suburbia, benefits from mass merchandising and product placement, and whose vision of America is so close to 1950s sitcoms.

Another feature of *Poltergeist* that marks the film as a Hooper piece is its narrative u-turns. Midway through the picture, one of Dr. Lesh's associates goes to the bathroom and proceeds to peel his face off. Squishy maggots push a juicy steak across a counter too. These are phantasms (imagined moments) not externally perceived by others. They are not quantifiable phenomena, as are the rest of the occurrences in *Poltergeist*. Therefore, they don't really fit in with the spectral wisps and flashing lights, and one suspects such horrific, gory images were included just to unsettle.

Perhaps more important is the fact that *Poltergeist* has two distinct climaxes. One arises logically out of the plot, the other is pure roller coaster. Near the end of the film, Steve and Diane band together and rescue the abducted Carol Anne from the afterlife. The family comes together, and Tangina pronounces, "This house is clean."

Well, we beg to differ.

The house is not clean (even though, logically, it should be), and that sets the stage for the over-the-top action-horror finale. If this were a Spielberg film, one can see how it might have played out. Carol Anne is restored (as little Barry was restored to his mother in *Close*

Encounters of the Third Kind), the restless, unhappy spirits find the light (E.T. phones home and hitches a ride back to the stars) and normal life resumes for the Freelings (as normal life resumes for Brody once the menace of the great white shark is dispatched in *Jaws*). But Hooper isn't usually satisfied with that kind of closure and so he tags a very personal ending onto *Poltergeist*, one that is as vicious and intense as any Hooper trademark scenes in *The Funhouse* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

A clown (a figure of terror also featured in *The Funhouse*) is animated to violent life, strangling a helpless child. This manifestation (like the face peel) is one of unadulterated horror. There is no wonder, no feeling of awe or enlightenment, just terror. Then, an unseen ghost tries to rape Mrs. Freeling and again this is beyond the previous scope of the film. The restless spirits have been defined as playful, grasping, dangerous even, but nothing could have prepared the audience for the intensity of this sexual attack (one that, literally, has Diane Freeling climbing the walls).

Then all hell explodes (much like the finale of *The Funhouse* in the gear room) and Hooper throws in everything but the kitchen sink. A swimming pool of corpses. An organic, tentacled maw leading straight to Hell. An imploding house! It isn't difficult to discern that this is a roller coaster ride pure and simple, an amusement park attraction that takes audiences on a jolting trip. As a side note to this argument, Hooper's conceit works: The climax of *Poltergeist* is adrenaline inducing, even if it isn't narratively valuable. After all, shouldn't the Freelings get their money back from Tangina? (And, oddly, the first thing they do in the sequel is consult the medium again. It's not like she did a very thorough job the first time.)

This author would argue that as a filmmaker, Hooper has always made an effort to take his climaxes over the top, regardless of the consequences to the narrative. The monster in *The Funhouse* isn't only killed, he's bashed, electrocuted, and caught in the gears of a carnival ride. A "possessed" machine is exorcised in *The Mangler*, but the exorcism doesn't take and the machine sprouts legs and starts to run after its enemies. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the heroine escapes but, again, there is no conventional narrative ending. Leatherface dances with his chainsaw on the side of a highway as the sun comes up and the girl is left a bloodied, raving maniac. In all these cases, the movies end on unconventional yet high notes, just like *Poltergeist*. A victory is overturned; a villain unexpectedly survives, incident piles upon incident until the audience is left breathless, and so on. This seems far more evocative of Hooper, the former magician

and “scare you at all costs” director than it does Spielberg, a brilliant man who prides himself on lyrical and emotional “storytelling” (with all of its requisite conventions, like narrative resolution). Hooper’s endings are super real (surreal), over-the-top and, sometimes, virtually independent (or even contradictory) to narrative expectations.

At a very basic, gut level, Hooper’s movies have always concerned the fear and ugliness of death. Though ostensibly more upbeat than the nihilist *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *Eaten Alive*, *Poltergeist* likewise finds itself obsessed with encroaching death. What is more remarkable (and again suggestive that the film was not directed by Spielberg) is that he places the fear of encroaching death into an arena where it is easily ignored, suburbia. The Questa Verde is a decaying place where death is just around every corner. The suburban streets are dotted with trees, but they are lifeless, leafless trees. They look sad, out of place, because real estate development has run rampant and killed off nature. Then Carol Anne’s little bird Tweety dies unexpectedly, shattering the illusion that life in suburbia is unending bliss and safety. Mortality is still a real issue here, as the colossal graveyards dotting the nearby hills testify. Finally, dark clouds roll in, signaling the insurrection of the unsettled spirits, and Hooper’s message is clearly rendered. The suburbs, even with all their luxuries, do not elevate humanity beyond the level where it must fear death. No place, not even middle class America, is insulated from the stench of death.

Finally, there’s the marijuana. In *Poltergeist*, Diane Freeling and Steve Freeling are depicted using illegal drugs in their bedroom. In what Spielberg film have heroic (not comedic) characters ever used illegal drugs? In Hooper’s *The Funhouse*, several characters are seen smoking marijuana before the terror begins, just like in *Poltergeist*. Hallucinogenic drugs also play a part in Tobe Hooper’s *Night Terrors* and *Crocodile* (with teenagers smoking pot around a campfire). Spielberg is much too respectable to go for that and Hooper’s subversive film work, including *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are often equated with a “bad trip” for their surreal, disturbing qualities.

Q: The Winged Serpent

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Larry Cohen is one of the best scriptwriters in the business. His narratives may be off-the-wall and kooky, but the man’s rhythm and

timing cannot be beaten; *Q: The Winged Serpent* is by no means an exception. A prehistoric lizard-like bird builds a nest in the top of the Chrysler Building and wreaks havoc on Manhattan. The premise is crazy as hell, but Cohen filmed this socially relevant piece during the K-car fiasco that nearly sunk the once-powerful automobile manufacturer. No one else could have pulled this off with such grace and charm, or with that deadpan, poker-faced delivery. Likewise, just to make sure that the battle was won, Cohen unleashed filmdom's best kept secret: Michael Moriarity. For Cohen, *Q* and its socio-political views display a bravery (or audacity) in filmmaking that is seldom, if ever, seen these days.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

“Larry Cohen never fails. This movie is a laugh riot. Michael Moriarity is *out there* in this film, but that’s only half of its appeal. The cheesy special effects make up the other half. This is a fun film, in a string of Cohen fun films, that seem almost throwbacks to cheapies from the drive-in days. The New York scenery and locations are effectively used, and the general zaniness makes it impossible to dislike this film. You can tell Cohen’s kind of giggling when he’s making these films. I know we are when we’re watching them.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Moriarity (Jimmy Quinn); Candy Clark (Joan); David Carradine (Shepard); Richard Roundtree (Powell); Lee Louis (Officer Banyon); Fred J. Scollary (Captain Fletcher); James Dixon (Lt. Murray); Malachy McCourt (Commissioner); Bruce Carradine (The Victim); Peter Hock (Detective Clifford); Ron Cey (Detective Hoberman); John Capodice (Doyle); Tony Page (Webb); Larkin Ford (Curator); Larry Pine (Professor); Eddie Jones (The Watchman); Fred Mosell (First Robber); Ed Korens (Second Robber); Bobbi Burns (Sunbather).

CREW: A United Film Distribution Release. Samuel Z. Arkoff Presents a Larco Production of a Larry Cohen Film. *Special Visual Effects by:* Dave Allen, Randy Cook, Peter Kurran, Lost Arts Inc. *Director of Photography:* Fred Murphy. *Associate Producer:* Paul Kurta. *Film Editor:* Armand Lebowitz. *Music:* Robert O. Ragland. “*Let’s Fall Apart Together Tonight*” *music by:* Andy Goldmark, *lyrics by:* Janelle Webb Cohen. “*Evil Dream*” *song by:* Michael Moriarity. *Post-production supervisor:* David Kern. *Executive Producers:* Dan Sandburg, Richard De Bona. *Production Executive:* Peter Sabiston. *Written, Produced and Directed by:* Larry

Cohen. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A gigantic flying and carnivorous serpent attacks Manhattanites, including a window washer and high-rise rooftop sun bather (Burns). A petty thief and crook, Jimmy Quinn (Moriarity) unexpectedly discovers the beast's lair at the top of the Chrysler Building while hiding there after a robbery goes badly. When criminal associates demand he turn over diamonds he actually lost during the heist, Quinn leads them to the roof and lets the serpent—an incarnation of the Aztec God Quetzacoatl—get 'em.

Meanwhile, Detective Shepard (Carradine) is convinced that a series of ritual sacrifices performed per Aztec tradition are connected to the appearance of the monster, and investigates that angle. When more New Yorkers die at the beak of the giant monster, Quinn goes to the authorities and arranges a sweet deal for himself: He will tell the commissioner where to find (and kill) the beast in exchange for total immunity (for past *and* future crimes) and book and movie rights to the monster's story.

The cops have no choice but to acquiesce to these demands and attack the beast from the top of the Chrysler Building with machine guns. However, Quetzacoatl has already laid eggs.

COMMENTARY: Now *this* is how an exploitation movie is done! Larry Cohen's *Q: The Winged Serpent* plays like a *Godzilla* movie seen through the lens of 1970s gritty realism, urban blight and authentic method acting. The film stars the oh-so-quirky Michael Moriarity in the role of a lifetime as a small-time crook who seizes on his discovery of a giant monster to go from being a nobody to a somebody. It's a winning monster movie, and Moriarity really pitches in, going so far as to sing a strange theme song for his character, "Evil Dream."

Q: The Winged Serpent opens with a brutal bang: A window washer on the Empire State Building gets his head bit off by a giant bird monster. The next day, a topless sunbather gets squeezed in its snapping beak and blood drips down on unsuspecting pedestrians at street level far below. Characters mouth ridiculous yet appropriate lines like "Hey, did you ever find that guy's head yet?" and then—the horror—Michael Moriarity actually scats.



The Quetzacoatl, star of *Q: The Winged Serpent* (1982), is revealed in all its glory as it perches on a Manhattan skyscraper.

Suffice it to say there has never been and likely never will be another giant monster movie anything like *Q: The Winged Serpent*. Most films of this subgenre labor over the discovery of the beast and pit it against old-fashioned movie heroes: army men or anthropologists, depending on the decade. *Q: The Winged Serpent* wants nothing to do with that tradition and instead comes off as a character piece, examining the soul of one man, a loser.

Moriarity plays Quinn, the man in question. He's a hustler, ex-junkie and all-around dipshit. By a sudden turn of good luck following his typical bad luck (he bungles a jewel heist on the street in broad daylight) he ends up the only person in Manhattan who can help the police stop the flying lizard monster.

It's Quinn's moment in the sun and he's not about to mess it up. Quinn goes to the commissioner of police and makes a bargain that he will point the authorities to the nest for immunity in perpetuity, or what he calls "a Nixon-like pardon." Quinn also wants a million dollars tax free, and exclusive rights to the photos of the monster, the book rights to the story, and the remains of the bloody thing.

Moriarity is always good, but he's remarkable in this particular

bargaining scene. Quinn is no hero at all but rather an anti-hero, one who sees everyone else's misery as his opportunity. Accordingly, this isn't a film about a monster, but about how a monster changes a man's life. How many giant creature features can make that claim?

I like to call *Q: The Winged Serpent* a street-level monster movie, because it's as much about the street and the little guy as the high-flying, stop-motion Quetzacoatl or a "hero's" attempt to save the city. The film benefits from an authentic New York beat and the use of some iconic locations including the Chrysler Building in the finale. This touch makes the film picturesque as well as involving.

Some might choose to see *Q: The Winged Serpent* as an exercise in camp but everything that every character says in this film is grounded in reality. The idea of a giant monster attacking New York City is fantasy but each person in the film reacts exactly as one might expect were it to actually happen. This film takes a fantasy-horror concept and grounds it in Moriarity's sleazy little loser. "I saved you all. I saved the whole fuckin' city," Quinn boasts at one point.

Moriarity does more than that. He saves the whole movie. A fine script by Cohen and some imaginative (though now dated) special effects sure help but Moriarity takes method acting to a whole new level in *Q: The Winged Serpent*.

Road Games

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stacy Keach (Patrick Anthony Quid); Jamie Lee Curtis (Hitch/Pamela); Marion Edward (Frita); Grant Page (Smith or Jones); Thaddeus Smith, Stephen Millchamp (Police Officers); Alan Hopsgood (Lester); John Murphy (Berry Balls); Robert Thompson (Sleazy Rider); Ed Turley (Road House Proprietor); Angie La Buzzette (Hitchhiker).

CREW: Embassy Home Entertainment presents a Richard Franklin film. *Screenplay:* Everett De Roche. *Original Story by:* Everett De Roche, Richard Franklin. *Director of Photography:* Vincent Monton. *Film Editor:* Edward McQueen-Mason. *Production Designer:* Jon Dowding. *Music Composed and Conducted by:* Brian May. *Executive Producer:* Bernard Schwartz. *Co-Producer:* Barbi Taylor. *Produced and Directed by:* Richard Franklin. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A truck driver named Quid (Keach) travels Australia with his faithful Dingo, Bosworth, amusing himself and passing the time with poetry, quotations, nicknames and other road games. On one such journey, running a truck full of meat to Perth during a meat shortage, Quid becomes embroiled in a game of terror when he is framed for the murder of a lovely young hitchhiker.

Quid follows the real killer, who keeps popping up all over the countryside, and eventually picks up a hitchhiker of his own, Pamela (Curtis). When Pamela disappears into the killer's green van at a rest stop, Quid makes every effort to catch the van and the killer, rescue his friend, and clear his own name.

COMMENTARY: The adjective Hitchcockian is an overused one whose original meaning has become corrupted in the 21st century. These days, every time a new thriller is released and boasts a surprising twist, some daft mainstream critic (affectionately dubbed "quote whores" by fans) breathlessly characterizes the film in question Hitchcockian. Sometimes you have to wonder how many of these folks have actually watched Hitchcock's movies recently, or ever. To truly merit the descriptor Hitchcockian, a cinematic work should boast fidelity to the master of suspense's *oeuvre* both in terms of subject matter and its presentation.

Case in point is *Road Games*, a film that legitimately earns the adjective. Richard Franklin's film, shot in Australia, is a textbook example of the Hitchcock aesthetic transferred and updated to a new locale. Considering leitmotif and subject matter first, *Road Games* adheres to the Hitchcock template in no less than three ways.

First, the film concerns voyeurism, one of Hitchcock's key obsessions. In the most notorious example, *Rear Window* (1954), the entire plot revolved around a character played by Jimmy Stewart who peered out of his apartment window and spied on the lives of others. Similarly, *Road Games* finds its protagonist, Quid, sitting in front of another window on the world, in this case a truck windshield.

The very act of driving involves adjusting and reacting to what is seen and observed, so it's a particularly interesting variation on voyeurism here, because unlike Jimmy Stewart, Quid isn't explicitly passive in his view as percipient. He drives while he watches, makes split-second decisions, and thus reacts to what the world throws at him.

Secondly, many Hitchcock's films include a hero who through either mistaken identity or intended subterfuge is mistaken for someone else

and framed for a crime. *North by Northwest* (1959) and *Frenzy* (1972) both pop to mind in regards to this character dilemma. Innocent characters are swept up into a world they don't control and must learn to exert control to clear their names. In *Road Games*, the killer frames Quid, even using his name when he checks into a motel, thus necessitating that Quid become more deeply involved in the mystery.

Thirdly, sexual deviance or abnormality informs Hitchcock's works, including—famously—*Psycho*. When aroused sexually, Norman Bates' mother personality would abruptly be triggered, leading to a homicide involving a large knife. Although the killer's motives are kept shadowy and mysterious in *Road Games*, he murders young, attractive female hitchhikers and the motive appears to be sexual, perhaps a deep-seated hatred of women. The scattering of the body parts indicates a fury against woman at the very least.

In context of presentation, Franklin is clearly a disciple of Hitchcock and *Road Games* demonstrates it at every turn. One of the finest elements of the average Hitchcock film is the droll wit, whether it be termed gallows humor or black comedy. To some extent, death is both terrifying and strangely funny in Hitchcock's world. Remember that brilliant scene in *Frenzy* when, following a murder, the potato killer gets caught in the back of a truck? *Road Games* assimilates this heritage and plays it in a different key. The entire film obsesses on games of all varieties, about relieving highway hypnosis and road boredom. Accordingly, games such as I-Spy come into the mix, Quid talks in rhyme, et cetera, and even the murders become a game of sorts, a focus to occupy time, a back-and-forth (dare I say game of cat and mouse?) between two drivers, one a murderer. Finally, the last joke is a dark one, involving the "meat" in the truck, and missing bodies.

Also much like Hitchcock, Franklin seems to recognize the superiority of suspense over surprise. He builds up audience expectations about a cooler that might just have a human head in it until it almost becomes unbearable. He fosters fear when Quid stops at a weighing station and learns that his vehicle is too heavy by seventy kilos ... the weight of a human body.

Since Jamie Lee Curtis's character, nicknamed Hitch (wink, wink), is missing at this point, one begins to wonder if that's where she ends up. The next scene takes Quid into the rear compartment of his truck and stretches out the suspense to an uncomfortable degree.

Because Franklin arrived after Hitchcock, the director also has

devilishly good fun playing against audience expectations. The maestro is famous for the Janet Leigh trick in *Psycho*: killing off his star in the first third. In *Road Games*, Jamie Lee Curtis (Leigh's real-life daughter) plays the lead female role and when she vanishes midway through the film, one's mind begins to race wondering what has become of her. Also, Franklin resists the temptation to expound on the motives of *Road Games'* killer, eschewing any scene like *Psycho*'s exposition-heavy coda.

A familiarity with Hitchcock makes *Road Games* rewarding because Franklin has a good time putting us on, alternating between faithful re-inventions of Hitchcock obsessions and subtle twists on them. Again, the motif of the film is a game, so *Road Games* is playful and delirious, and simultaneously highly suspenseful. The great thing about Richard Franklin is that he makes everything appear effortless. Like Hitchcock's work, the film is precise and disciplined, an exercise in restraint, but he makes it look easy, fun.

And true to his own work, Alfred Hitchcock even makes a cameo in *Road Games*, after a fashion.

CLOSE-UP: The (Road) Game's afoot: The taut, energetic *Road Games* emerged from the clockwork mind of Australian auteur and technical virtuoso Richard Franklin, the talent behind films such as *Patrick* (1978) and *Psycho II* (1983).

Mr. Franklin describes for us how the concept of *Road Games* emerged: "I gave Everett [de Roche] the *Rear Window* screenplay as a pro forma for *Patrick*. He said, 'Wouldn't it be great in a moving vehicle?'

"Once the script was finished (we worked on it in Fiji while I co-produced *The Blue Lagoon*), I took it to Hollywood and I met Bernard Schwartz through Andrew London (who would edit *Psycho II*). Andrew was sound editing on *Coal Miner's Daughter* and introduced us the very day my agent had sent Bernie the script, so he thought it an omen and introduced me to Bob Rehme of Avco-Embassy, who'd seen *Patrick* and liked it. They offered us a pick-up and I went back and sold it to the Australian Film Commission."

One may wonder, watching the tense *Road Games*, if Franklin had intended to do for highways what Hitchcock had accomplished with showers, but the director says that was not his game. "Never thought of that. Anyway, *Duel* had already been made. I was just struck by how much like a Panavision movie screen a truck window looked, and how the driver looked out and down at the world. *Rear Window*

again.”

And how did Jamie Lee Curtis, late of *Prom Night*, *Terror Train* and *The Fog*, come into the picture?

“I had cast an Aussie girl in the part, but Avco wanted more ‘cast insurance,’ ” says Franklin. “I wish it had been a bigger part, though I don’t know how we could have enlarged it. But the casting changed at the last minute.”

Here I pointed out to Franklin that Curtis was the scream queen of the epoch, and that having her in the cast brought some “baggage” as well as enjoyment for slasher fans.

“I’d like to claim that her disappearance was to throw the audience off guard—like her mother’s death in *Psycho*. But apart from *Halloween*, she hadn’t really hit yet. I met her on the set of *The Fog* and John Carpenter gave me her phone number. Unfortunately, Avco probably tried to sell it as her latest horror film, which could only have disappointed U.S. audiences.”

And how did Franklin enjoy working with the actress? “Loved it,” the director says. “Had a crush on her.”

And did the subject of her other horror efforts ever come up on the set? “Not really at the time. But later when we agreed it would be a bad idea for her to do *Psycho II*.”

Franklin recalls that the greatest challenge on *Road Games* was “keeping it on track when the completion insurers started to pressure us near the end. We were the first Aussie company ever to have a Completion Guarantor and everyone else wanted to fold.”

Contrarily, getting it past the censors in America was not a challenge at all, according to Franklin; in fact the opposite was true. “Indeed, the head in the bucket was added to appease Avco.”

Today *Road Games* enjoys a positive reputation “which seems to keep growing,” according to Franklin, especially among fans of Hitchcockian thrillers and eighties horror films. However, this wasn’t necessarily the case at first.

“The opening weekend was a disappointment,” Franklin remembers. “It was only when it got on TV it really took off.”

The Sender

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kathryn Harrold (Gail Farmer); Shirley Knight (Jerolyn); Paul Freeman (Dr. Denman); Zeljko Ivanek (The Sender); Sean Hewitt (The Messiah); Tracy Harper (Young Girl); Al Matthews (Vietnam Veteran); Harry Ditson (Dr. Hirsch); Marsha Hunt (Nurse Jo); Olivier Pierre (Dr. Erskine); Angus MacInnes (Sheriff Prouty); Jana Sheldon (Nurse Reimbولد); Monica Buferd (Dr. Warren); Alibe Parsons (Nurse).

CREW: Paramount Pictures in association with Kingmere Properties Ltd presents an Edward S. Feldman Production. *Casting:* Mary Selway, Mary Goldberg. *Associate Producers:* J.C. Scott, John Comfort. *Music:* Trevor Jones. *Film Editor:* Alan Strachan. *Production Designer:* Malcolm Middleton. *Director of Photography:* Roger Pratt. *Special Effects:* Nick Allder. *Written by:* Thomas Baum. *Produced by:* Edward S. Feldman. *Directed by:* Roger Christian. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Psychologist Gail Farmer (Harrold) attempts to help a man admitted to the State Mental Hospital, designated John Doe #83, (Ivanek), after he attempts to drown himself in a nearby lake. The young man is resistant to counseling, and Farmer's associate Dr. Denman (Freeman) proposes shock therapy.

Soon, Dr. Farmer begins to experience strange visions, including an intruder in her house, and then even the phantom specter of John Doe's mother Jerolyn (Knight) at the hospital. She realizes that John is somehow "sending" these images from his dreams to her, and worse, that he is haunted by his mother, who died months ago but is—somehow—still maintaining contact with him. John continues to send more and more disturbing visions to everyone on the ward, disrupting the hospital. Farmer realizes the key to the mystery may lay at his isolated country home ... a place that someone tried to burn to the ground.

COMMENTARY: *The Sender* is an oddity. It's a rubber reality film about terrifying dreams, and it arrives in cinema history well before *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Simply put, the film derives its power from *Psycho*, dramatizing the tale of a man haunted by his dead mother. Only in this case, the Norman Bates figure boasts terrifying paranormal powers, particularly the ability to "send" his dreams to others, including the film's protagonist, a therapist played by Kathryn

Harrold.



A shattered reflection tortures a mysterious telepath (Zeljko Ivanek).

Like one of the later *Nightmare on Elm Street* sequels, *The Sender* lives and dies based on its harrowing, often surreal dream sequences. On this front, the film doesn't disappoint. There's an early scene that finds Gail at home in bed when she hears glass breaking. She looks for the source of the noise, and the movie then provides a startling jump. In a nicely conceived composition, Harrold gazes out a window, and in the reflection, a black mass—a stranger—crosses the frame behind her. It's chill-inducing.

The sense of terror mounts, and the horror of the dream sequences escalates as the film continues. One shocker arrives later in the film as Harrold rushes to a washroom in the hospital. The water from the spigot turns to blood, and then the mirrors on the wall before her crack ... and also bleed. Again, like the latter *Elm Street* films, *The Sender* offers no clue as to when reality goes rubber, no bridge between waking consciousness and nightmare imagery, and so dreams come unexpectedly, keeping viewers off-balance.

In probably the most impressive rubber reality moment, the powerful

telepath John Doe, is given shock treatment, and lashes out at the staff in the operating theater with him. They're hurled through the air into glass windows, over carts, even smashed against the ceiling. This is a gory, traumatic *The Omen*-style set piece, though disappointingly it turns out to be a dream.



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Jerolyn (Shirley Knight) exerts diabolical control over her son, the telepath (Ivanek). Both from *The Sender*.

Another good scene involves rats swarming in Gail's bedroom, eating John Doe's corpse and squirming and skittering out of his mouth. Again, it's gross and unexpected. When *The Sender* lets loose with its horror imagery, it's enjoyable.

However, pacing drags occasionally and it's unclear how the climax at the cabin could stop the rampaging mother, who loves her son so much that she wants him to join her in the grave. The cabin is destroyed, and the film seems to indicate that its destruction will stop the appearances by the evil mother, even though she has been detected at the hospital and other locations throughout the film. The movie then decides for its "sting in the tail/tale" that she isn't really destroyed after all but still holding onto John Doe. So maybe the cabin explosion was just a gimmick to fool the authorities? It could have been made clearer what's happening here.

The best way to enjoy *The Sender* is to watch it for individual moments, those dramatic set pieces and hallucinations (like one involving locusts swarming in a refrigerator). Cleverly depicted, the special effects and horror moments in the film make the senses tingle with dread and repulsion.

Slumber Party Massacre



Cast and Crew

CAST: Michele Michaels (Trish); Robin Stille (Valerie); Michael Villela (Russ Thorn); Debra De Liso (Kim); Andree Honore (Jackie); Gina Mari (Diane); Jennifer Meyers (Courtney); Joe Johnson (Neill); David Millbern (Jeff); Jim Boyce (John Miner); Pamela Roylance (Coach Jana); Brinke Stevens (Linda); Jean Vargas (Telephone Repairwoman); Anna Patton (Mrs. Devereaux); Howard Purgason (Mr. Devereaux); Aaron Lipstadt (Pizza Boy).

CREW: *Presented by:* Embassy Home Entertainment. *Film Editor:* Sean Foley. *Director of Photography:* Steve Posey. *Music:* Ralph Jones. *Co-Producer:* Aaron Lipstadt. *Special Effects:* Larry Carr, Rick Lazzarini, Makeup Effects Lab. *Written by:* Rita Mae Brown. *Produced and Directed by:* Amy Jones. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Venice, California, Russ Thorn (Villela), an escaped psychopath, goes on a killing spree. First he murders a telephone repair woman (Vargas), then he takes out the members of a local high school's varsity basketball team on the eve of their slumber party. He slays a neighbor watching over the girls, and then proceeds to kill off each of the partygoers. Finally it is up to two frightened sisters to face the killers alone.

COMMENTARY: *Slumber Party Massacre* is yet another slasher film that recruits the commonly seen paradigm. Even though it's easy to see that there's little new here, the film is executed well, even artistically at points.

The film features a villain named Russ Thorn who, like Michael Myers in *Halloween*, is an escaped mental patient. He's a small, thin man with evil eyes and the film doesn't attempt to build in a psychological motivation for his killing spree. Indeed, his weapon provides all the information one would ever need: the giant drill is a phallic symbol, a substitute penis, and many shots reveal it lowering and spinning down

between his legs.

Slumber Party Massacre's organizing principle is—you guessed it—the slumber party. It provides the victim pool (voluptuous young girls wearing pajamas or nothing at all), the location (a suburban house), and all the requisite details one needs in a slasher picture, like the red herring (a next door neighbor) and the surprise visit by the pizza delivery guy. Final girl Valerie is the sweet virginal type, one drawn into combat and found more than capable of defending herself. And in an evolution of the form, her own little sister too.

One can find these ingredients, shuffled about differently, in just about any slasher film circa 1980–82. What separates *Slumber Party Massacre* from the bunch? For one thing, director Amy Jones and writer Rita Mae Brown throw in a number of surprises and twists that keep the viewer off-balance. In particular, Jones has a gift with composition and pacing which makes the scary sequences actually frightening.



This was your father's thing: James Arness in the Howard Hawks film, *The Thing from Another World* (1951).

To wit, early in the film, there's a fascinating use of depth of field. Teenage buddies josh and play in the foreground of a shot, in a parking lot, while in the background, a victim of the killer is depicted banging at a van window from the inside, unnoticed and desperate. This is an artful way of showing a death without lingering on gore, and it points out that field of vision—what characters perceive and

don't perceive—is an important part of the slasher format. Just moments ago, the teenage boys were talking to the victim, flirting with her. But later, their attention was diverted and she was killed right under their noses. Interesting too how the victim's space in the frame has been curtailed to the little square of that van rear window; she's entrapped behind the window and the staging of her death mirrors that entrapment.

The film's sense of humor is also commendable and offers relief from the oppressive formula. In the locker room sequence, for instance, the killer's whirring drill enters a wall, right next to a sign that reads EMERGENCY DRILL PROCEDURE. And during the nighttime siege, editor Sean Foley cuts between a slasher film on TV and a murder in the front yard of Valerie's house. Similarly, director Jones finds a humorous (and suspenseful) way to stage a scene involving a body stowed in the refrigerator. Even some of the dialogue has a droll quality. The pizza arrives with a dead delivery boy, and one of the girls checks him for signs of life and declares, "He's cold." To which another girl replies, "is the pizza?" Self-reflexive touches all, these knowing moments ease the pain of picking out final girls, red herrings, final chases and *coups de grâce*.

Ultimately, what differentiates *Slumber Party Massacre* and helps it rise above many in the slasher pack in terms of quality is the film's sexual politics. The film was written and directed by women, and it shows in how events play out. For instance, midway through the film, the boyfriends go out to save the girls ... but are all killed by Russ Thorn with hardly any effort. In other words, no damsels in distress will be rescued by knights on white horses here. If the women are to survive the killer with the phallic drill, they'll need to do the work themselves.

That dynamic plays out in the end when Valerie, Trish and the coach team up to stop Russ. Armed with a machete, Valerie ultimately makes the most important strike against Thorn: She amputates his overlong drill bit. This renders the killer impotent, and Valerie is able to finish the job by penetrating him with the machete. A strong female has turned the tables on a man, first lopping off his most dangerous tool (his phallus), and then actually feminizing him by making him the victim of phallic penetration himself. Whether or not this is in bad taste is, perhaps, up to individual viewers, but after so many slasher films directed by men, it's a pleasure to see how one looks from the female perspective.

As always, the bottom line with any horror movie is how scary it is, and on that regard, *Slumber Party Massacre* is also superior. There are

jolts and jumps aplenty, especially in one scene when the canny killer hides under a blanket and pretends to be a victim. There he waits, biding his time, ready to reach out, any second, for a passing ankle or foot...

Still of the Night

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[S]pare, superbly tingling psychological thriller ... full of finely observed small-scale pleasures and frissons, especially for New Yorkers, such as Scheider’s lonely vigil in that dungeon of terror, the basement laundry room, and a stunning *Rear Window* sequence...”—Molly Haskell, “Sex and Star Quality,” *Vogue*, November 1982, page 50.

“Roy Scheider and Meryl Streep lead a handsome, proficient cast, but the players seem stiff and ill at ease, as though not persuaded of the venture’s validity, or overawed by the elegance of their surroundings...”—Robert Hatch, *The Nation*, December 18, 1982, page 688.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Roy Scheider (Dr. Sam Rice); Meryl Streep (Brooke Reynolds); Jessica Tandy (Grace Rice); Joe Grifasi (Detective Joseph Vitucci); Sara Botsford (Gail Phillips); Josef Sommer (George Bynum); Rikke Borge (Heather Wilson); Irving Metzman (Murray Gordon); Larry Joshua (Mugger); Danielle Cusson (Girl); John Bentley (Night Watchman); Randy Jurgenson (Car Thief).

CREW: *Presented by:* United Artists. *Music:* John Kander. *Costume Designer:* Albert Wolsky. *Casting:* Juliet Taylor. *Associate Producers:* Wolfgang Glatte, Kenneth Utt. *Film Editor:* Jerry Greenberg. *Production Designer:* Mel Bourne. *Director of Photography:* Nestor Almendros. *Story:* David Newman, Robert Benton. *Producer:* Arlene Donovan. *Production Manager:* Kenneth Utt. *Makeup:* Roy Helland, Frances Kolor. *Writer-Director:* Robert Benton. *Running time:* 91 minutes; *MPAA Rating:* PG.

SYNOPSIS: One of psychiatrist Sam Rice’s (Scheider) clients, George Bynum (Sommer), is found dead. His mistress (Streep) also worked with Bynum at a metropolitan auction house. Rice is intrigued with

the woman and after reviewing his session notes recalls that George was fearful of being involved with a deceptively innocent woman. Could that be Brooke Reynolds, his mistress?

The key to the crime, Rice believes, may actually be an odd dream filled with portents and symbol that George described during a session. When Rice learns that Brooke saw George the night of the murder, his psychiatrist mother (Tandy) urges Rice to go to the police and tell them everything he knows. But it is too late for Sam, for he has fallen in love with the mysterious and beautiful Brooke. Now he just needs evidence to prove she is innocent ... evidence that may not even exist. The murder of George Bynum is finally solved after a meeting with Brooke in the house that George dreamed about. It is a time of revelations, and a time to confront a murderer in darkness...

COMMENTARY: Hollywood doesn't make movies like *Still of the Night* any more. That's because this is a technically accomplished work of tremendous precision and skill, and the 20-year-old tyros making movies today just don't have the chops. They can create CGI comic-book adaptations till the cows come home, but actually create an icy, logical—*patient*—thriller, replete with canny symbolic imagery? It's not gonna happen. Not until the system changes.

Still of the Night is a thriller in the Hitchcock vein, and one aimed at thoughtful adults, not easily surprised sixteen-year-olds. It's sexy and intellectual, and much of the film's suspense generates from the interpretation and misinterpretation of symbols in a dream.

It's Roy Scheider's job, as a psycho-therapist, to read and understand the disturbing dreams of one of his clients. Dreams may represent subconscious horrors, traumas in the past, a perpetual anxiety—anything, really—and ferreting out the meaning behind them isn't easy, yet *Still of the Night* draws in the viewer. The dream is revealed on screen, in part at first, and later in totality, and so the audience is right there, puzzling through questions and possible theories. Since watching a film has often been likened to dreaming with eyes open, it only makes sense that film imagery could be deployed to create such a fascinating phantasm.

The dream begins with the camera technique of an iris opening upon a secluded wooded lane and a house (one located in Long Island, the audience learns). There's a little girl at one window, grasping a teddy bear. There's a cat on the roof; inside, the house is filled with sheet-draped furniture. Scheider, our guide through the dream, spots a green box in a wardrobe, but then a falcon appears and flies away in a

flurry. There's a giggle and then a little girl is standing behind him. She plucks off the eye of her teddy bear. The wound on the stuffed animal then bleeds profusely, and blood runs down the little girl's leg. She watches and follows Scheider as he navigates the corridors of the house, and so on.

This nightmare imagery is crisp, engaging, and wrought with symbolism. Scheider's character believes it suggests that his patient (dreamer George Bynum) was involved with a woman who on the surface appears quite childlike and innocent but who is actually dangerous, even murderous. The question then becomes, which woman is it? Scheider comes to understand everything (and each symbol, from the box to the wardrobe to the cat on the roof actually has a real-life counterpart) only when—during a nail-biting climax—he actually finds the dark, isolated dream house and heads inside.

Still of the Night works like a well-oiled machine. To provoke tension, Benton cross-cuts at crucial points. For instance, as Dr. Rice leaves an auction (where Streep's character is working), he heads upstairs to rifle through her office and see what he can learn. The film cuts back to Streep and then back to Scheider, to create audience fear that he will be discovered. Another scene, set in a basement laundry room, is downright terrifying. There's a rattling outside the room, and Rice goes to check it out. Both sides of the frame around him are pitch black, and the pipes above serve to further bracket the protagonist, limiting him to a small space on screen. Finally the scene ends with a jolt—the ubiquitous cat jump (a feline leaps out of the darkness with a screech). This is the oldest trick in the book, and yet here it absolutely works.

Meryl Streep, who has done such great work in so many genres, does remarkably well as the Hitchcockian blonde ice queen. She plays her character, Brooke, with a coolness that just might be shyness, or worse, cold calculation. Streep also nails a final monologue in the film. It's here that you'll note it isn't what Brooke says that remains with the audience, but how Streep says it. Streep is also gorgeous in this film, and so the audience is wondering all along if she is a femme fatale or just a "hurt" little girl.

The denouement arises straight out of Slasher ville as a killer with a knife strikes from the back seat of a car (a paradigm cliché) and stalks a final girl. There's a terrific composition when Streep hides on a staircase behind a door. A sliver of light illuminates a stripe on her face. She leans forward to see if she has been detected and—whammo!—a knife juts through the slit, nearly taking her eye out.

Robert Benton's *Still of the Night* is that rare combination of a clever script with great performances and expert visuals. It may not be a classic on a par with a De Palma, Franklin or Hitchcock thriller, but it certainly holds the attention, and keeps tension high, throughout its 91 minutes.

A Stranger Is Watching



Cast and Crew

CAST: Kate Mulgrew (Sharon Martin); Rip Torn (Artie Taggart); James Naughton (Steve Peterson); Shaun Von Schreiber (Julie Peterson); Ray Poole (Walter Kurner); Stephen Joyce (Detective Taylor); Frank Hamilton (Bill); Maggie Task (Mrs. Lufts); James Russo (Ronald Thompson); David Brooks (Big Bum); William Hickey (Max); Stephen Strimpell (Detective Marlowe); Joanne Dorian (Nina); Barbara Baxley (Lally); Jenny Ventriess (Kathy Green).

CREW: MGM presents a Sidney Beckerman production of a Sean S. Cunningham film. *Casting:* Julie Hughes, Barry Moss. *Special Effects:* Connie Brink. *Associate Producer:* Jack Grossberg. *Costume Designer:* Joseph G. Aulisi. *Music:* Lalo Schifrin. *Film Editor:* Susan E. Cunningham. *Art Director:* Virginia Field. *Director of Photography:* Barry Abrams. *Based upon the novel by:* Mary Higgins Clark. *Screenplay by:* Earl Mae Rauch, Victor Miller. *Producer:* Sidney Beckerman. *Directed by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Young Julie Peterson (Von Schreiber) awakens from a deep slumber to witness the murder of her mother by an assailant armed with a hammer. Two years later, the man accused of the crime, Ronald Thompson (Russo), is scheduled to be executed, but a TV news reporter, Sharon Martin (Mulgrew), believes there might be something to his story that he was just a delivery boy who happened upon the scene after the murderer had left. Julie's father Steve (Naughton) doesn't want his daughter to relive the nightmare and has been protecting her from the press. But the real murderer—a vulgar, rough man and serial killer—abducts Julie and Sharon and demands \$82,000 in ransom. He locks them up in a cell near the subways, far below Grand Central Station. Sharon and Julie make several attempts to escape, but their captor is ready for them. Finally, after Sharon is stabbed, Julie makes a run for it and flees from her cell into a local

train yard, the killer in close pursuit.

COMMENTARY: Based on the novel by Mary Higgins Clark, Sean Cunningham's *A Stranger Is Watching* is a nifty suspense thriller that doesn't deserve to have gone on to great oblivion. Every decade has a trend and a back-trend, at least so far as horror movies go, and *A Stranger is Watching*, which concerns a serial killer with a face and a personality, came along about a decade too early. Had it been made in the 1990s and the age of Anthony Hopkins' Hannibal Lector rather than the age of Jason, Michael Myers and other faceless slashers, it may very well have achieved blockbuster status instead of warranting a footnote. As it stands, it's a film like *Still of the Night* (1982), *Manhunter* (1986) and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1989), a part of a back-trend to feature more "human," less supernatural killers.

A Stranger Is Watching, not to be confused with *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), begins slowly as the main characters are introduced and the film obsesses on the idea of memory. Is it possible, the film asks, that a traumatized little girl who saw the murder of her mother may have fingered the wrong man? This is interesting (especially in the manner in which fast-cuts are deployed to reveal to the audience how Julie combined the face of the killer with the face of an innocent delivery boy) but the film really takes off when Julie and Sharon Martin (Kate Mulgrew) are captured by the serial killer, played by Rip Torn, and locked away deep in the bowels of Grand Central Station.

In one exemplary sequence, Sharon and Julie discover a dumbwaiter in their cell. Julie climbs in and Sharon pulls on the rope to lift the girl up to another level. Unfortunately, it's dark up in those walls and all Julie can find is a maze of pipes and ... rats. As this scene unspools, the audience fears all the time that Artie Taggart (Torn) will return and punish the women for attempting an escape.

This is followed by another, even more elaborate and anxiety-provoking scene as Mulgrew's character attempts to distract Artie as Julie tiptoes out of the room. These scenes work so well not merely because Cunningham has picked appropriate shots to reveal the action, but because the film has set up a sort of "double threat." First, the women must escape their murderous captor, and that's harrowing enough. But secondly, their escape is contingent on a very important time line. If they don't escape in short order, an innocent man will be executed. This is a surprisingly efficacious way of generating suspense, and *A Stranger Is Watching* pumps up the adrenaline.

One must credit young Shawn Van Schreiber (Julie) and Kate

Mulgrew with creating likable characters that the audience really comes to root for. There is an agonizing, almost unbearable moment near film's end when Julie is ordered into a bag by the killer, and she protests. Then, the killer stabs Mulgrew in the gut with a screwdriver. It's a tough, bracing moment and made worse by the fact that Mulgrew genuinely appears not to see it coming whereas the audience is expecting the blow, but hoping against hope it won't come. Or that somehow Mulgrew's character will avoid it. This attack is cleverly shot and heartbreaking too.

The finale is a humdinger, involving the killer impaled on a pipe after a lengthy final chase in a train yard. One nail-biting moment involves Julie trapped in a passenger car, with Artie entering at the far end. There's no place to hide in the car and no way out either, except the way she came in. She attempts to hide with a blanket as the killer approaches and the moment is charged with anticipation.

A Stranger Is Watching even accomplishes some surprises with its homeless characters, who are usually depicted in 1980s films (like *Prince of Darkness* [1987]) as somehow threatening. Here, the homeless of Grand Central Station attempt to help the imprisoned women and strike back against the serial killer, not always successfully.

Although it's not a slasher film in the traditional sense, but more like a 1990s serial killer movie, *A Stranger Is Watching* proves involving, even pulse-pounding, and Kate Mulgrew is terrific in the lead role. Not just a final girl, but a final woman, her character in some fashion points in the direction towards such later female warriors as Ripley in *Aliens* (1986) and Kirsty in *Hellbound* (1988), both of whom had to do more than protect their own skin.

The Thing

★★★★★

Critical Reception

"The new *Thing* was, technically, quite brilliant in its use of special effects. ... Whether such gory reality is a good Thing or not is a moot point. Because of a constant lack of discretion, one is always aware of a camera, a director, a point of view being imposed upon an audience."—Tom Hutchinson, Roy Pickard, *Horrors: A History of Horror Movies*, Chartwell Books, Inc., 1984, page 118.

“It has no pace, sloppy continuity, zero humor, bland characters ... It’s my contention John Carpenter was never meant to direct science fiction horror movies. Here’s some things he’d be better suited to direct: Traffic accidents, train wrecks and public floggings...”—Alan Spencer, *Starlog* # 64, November 1982, page 69.

“Ah, I’ve got fond memories of this flick: the dog racing across the ice, the electric blood test, Russell’s appealing scruffiness. I love the atmosphere of the 1950s film, but this version is scarier and more intense—the alien morphing into doggy and spidery shapes always creeps me out, even if the FX are a little, um, cheesy. And it always makes me think of the other SF stories that feature aliens under Antarctic ice (like *The X-Files* and *Stargate SG-1*)—I like to fantasize about what neat extraterrestrial stuff we might find there if we did some serious digging.”—MaryAnn Johanson, *The Flick Filosopher*, film critic.

“Everybody loves this film now, but not too many people liked it when it came out. It’s generally considered to be one of Carpenter’s masterpieces. Rob Bottin did a bunch of stuff that seemed pretty impossible in the days before CGI. It was certainly visually different than anything we’d seen up to that point. Carpenter picked a fine cast —perhaps the finest in any of his films. But like the ice in this film, it’s cold. It overwhelms, but it has no real empathetic characters to bring it home. The 1970s era *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a good counterpoint to *The Thing*—the threat is very similar, but Donald Sutherland made it seem like we were all in danger, while the characters in Carpenter’s film already seem dead at the beginning of the film. They already don’t like each other. So, their trust falls apart quickly. That’s no surprise. Carpenter cast extremely likable actors to play fairly boring, unlikable characters. There are certainly glimpses of the time in this plotline—a me-first attitude, lack of trust, no sense of community, but it ultimately hurts the drama. While there is much to admire in this film from a technical perspective, this viewer didn’t really care if anyone survived. The Thing as a name might have applied to anyone in it.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“Great flick, and Kurt Russell’s chin never got in the way of the story. This is horror for the thinking person, about the alien within us all. Perfect ending too.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kurt Russell (MacReady); A. Wilford Brimley (Blair); T.K.

Carter (Nauls); David Clennon (Palmer); Keith David (Childs); Richard Dysart (Dr. Copper); Charles Hallahan (Norris); Peter Maloney (Bennings); Richard Masur (Clark); Donald Moffat (Garry); Joel Polis (Fuchs); Thomas Waites (Windows); Robert Weisser (Norwegian); Larry Franco (Norwegian Passenger with Rifle); Nate Irwin (Pilot); William Zeman (Pilot).

CREW: A Universal Picture, a Turman-Foster Company co-production. *Casting:* Anita Dann. *Music:* Ennio Morricone. *Film Editor:* Todd Ramsay. *Special Makeup Effects Created and Designed by:* Rob Bottin. *Special Visual Effects:* Albert Whitlock. *Production Designer:* John L. Lloyd. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Associate Producer:* Larry Franco. *Producers:* David Foster, Larry Turman. *Co-Producer:* Stuart Cohen. *Executive Producer:* Wilbur Stark. *Screenplay:* Bill Lancaster. *Based on the story "Who Goes There" by:* John W. Campbell. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dick Warlock. *Directed by:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the winter of 1982, a Norwegian helicopter buzzes an American outpost, National Science Institute Station 4, in pursuit of a runaway dog. The men of the base, including Childs (David), Palmer (Clennon), Bennings (Maloney) and helicopter pilot (MacReady), watch with surprise and confusion as the Norwegians go all-out to kill the dog, dropping bombs, firing a rifle, and ultimately destroying themselves in an accident. While the dog is taken inside the outpost, MacReady and Dr. Copper (Dysart) fly to the Norwegian camp to see if everyone there is okay.

They find that the scientists stationed at that site had discovered a spacecraft in the ice, and even more ... some kind of living life-form frozen in a block ... but now thawed. On return to the base, MacReady and others see the dog undergo a bizarre and frightening molecular transformation, and realize that an alien shape-shifting entity—one that can spread like a virus—has entered the camp. Worse, there's no way to tell who is already infected by the alien, a perfect human copy, but really a hiding extra-terrestrial. The only way to kill the alien interloper is with fire, and the only way to detect it is with a blood test, but events go awry as the station's personnel die horrible deaths. Finally, MacReady and a few survivors realize they must destroy the base, their very shelter, so that the alien will not survive the long winter ahead.

COMMENTARY: *The Thing* represents John Carpenter's most accomplished and underrated directorial effort. It also happens to be the best science fiction-horror film of 1982, an incredibly competitive

year, and perhaps even the best genre motion picture of the decade. In clinical terms *The Thing* expertly states its two central themes (the frailty of human flesh and the dehumanization of man and his increasing paranoia in the modern age) at the same time that it features amazing shape-shifting mechanical effects courtesy of Rob Bottin.

Although it was attacked during its theatrical release for being excessively gory and explicitly graphic, there is a method to Carpenter's madness in *The Thing*. Perhaps above all, his re-make of the Howard Hawks film shows a recognition and fear of that most deadly of invisible invaders: disease. Whether it be an early variation of AIDS called the "gay plague" that Carpenter was responding to or merely in more general terms, cancer, hepatitis, or even "aging," his film boasts an acute awareness of how desperately vulnerable human flesh is to external attack, perversion, and even subversion. The frailty of the flesh is the issue at the core of *The Thing*, and so director Carpenter continually shows his audience (often in nauseating close-up) how the flesh can be distorted, ruined, destroyed, or even repaired.

To wit: Almost immediately in the film, the viewer sees a close-up of the dead Norwegian attacker. His eye is a shattered mess, destroyed by a bullet from Gary's gun. In the same portion of the film, there is also a close-up of Bennings getting his gun wound stitched up by Dr. Copper. His perforated flesh pulls and stretches as the stitches run through it like thread through cloth. Both of these images establish immediately, even before the insidious *modus operandi* of the otherworldly intruder is introduced, that humankind is vulnerable to an attack and reshaping of the skin ... our very contact with the world around us.

Though these close-ups were often dismissed by critics as being present in the final cut of *The Thing* solely for shock effect, nothing could be further from the truth. The shape of human flesh is the shape of human life, and Carpenter builds a sense of discomfort in his audience by revealing in detail how vulnerable flesh really is to all manners and methods of attack (from gunshots to alien invaders).

The motif of stretched, reshaped or transformed humanity is at the heart of *The Thing*, and so Carpenter continues to reveal, in horrific form, how man is continually victimized by "diseases," or in the case of *The Thing*, extra-terrestrials. As the tension builds, Dr. Copper and MacReady discover a dead Norwegian at the ruined foreign encampment. The corpse's flesh has been permanently "separated" at

his neck, and solidified frozen blood like an icicle is hanging from slit wrists. This is another hint of the horror still to come: Flesh can appear different at different times. Here it is solid, frozen in an unnatural pattern that is inimical to human life. Once again, mankind is shown to be vulnerable, but this time it is a vulnerability to the environment (the cold) that surrounds him. Carpenter does not shy away from facing these grotesqueries head-on and much of the film's believability originates from his choice to take a clinical approach to these early scenes of violence and death.



Hallway huddle: A tense moment for the ensemble in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982).

There are two autopsy scenes in *The Thing*, each one handled in a clinical, cool manner as the doctors (Blair and Copper) do their ghoulish business professionally and calmly. They remove organs and analyze each one, again revealing to viewers how little it really takes to pull a man apart, piece by piece. Innards are seen as important in this scene, for it is a man's innards that will differentiate him from the Thing in the hours to come. These scenes were also misinterpreted as "gratuitous" in 1982 but blunt-faced autopsies of this variety are later done almost every week on *The X-Files*. They are part and parcel of the scientific-horror genre. *The Thing* reminds us that we are human beings are but vulnerable packages inside vulnerable sheathing.

As the titular creature is introduced, Carpenter takes his “frailty of the flesh” approach to extremes never seen before in film; extremes that generate genuine terror. After preparing audiences for the horror to come with multiple shots of stitches, wounds, and even half-burned remains wherein human skin is stretched and contorted in an expression of anguish, Carpenter then breaks the bonds of flesh completely by depicting how humanity can be infected and re-shaped by a malevolent force.



MacReady (Kurt Russell) blasts the shape-shifting alien in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982).

Eyeballs pop open in leathery skin. Yawning mouths transform into blossoming flower-like maws on the end of ever-growing appendages. Norris's severed head uses a lizard-like tongue to pull itself across the floor, and then spider legs come crunching out of his cranium to help the Thing skitter away. At one point, the infected Blair puts his hand *through* Gary's face, stretching Gary's mouth and face out of proportion. In the most disgusting moments of *The Thing*, Norris's neck elongates, stretching and popping and ejaculating green liquids. These moments, all shocking and fear-inducing, de-construct the sanctity of the flesh. Just as disease destroys man, this otherworldly invader does likewise, and Carpenter's long and steady build (from gruesome close-

ups to all-out full-body carnage) expresses this theme visually.

Much of the terror originates from Carpenter's thesis that the flesh can be perverted in innumerable ways; that the flesh can hide something horrid underneath the surface. Thus Rob Bottin's special effects demonstrate how seemingly disparate life forms can be juxtaposed into one entity. The soft, beautiful fur of a husky pup suddenly gives way to slimy, cartilaginous insect legs and the impact of the metamorphosis is startling. Death and decay, horror and pain, can exist just beneath the surface of normality. *The Thing* warns man to beware of disease, of the invisible invader who can turn us into ugly, sick things filled with death. "Man is the warmest place to hide" was *The Thing's* ad line and it is totally appropriate to the content of the film. Horror comes not in haunted houses, not from outside, like the "stalker" but in the very cells and organs that encompass our "wholeness."

The Thing itself is a frightening screen monster because just one cell of it can survive to infect a human being. It is unstoppable, and for a time it is undetectable ... like diseases such as AIDS.

Carpenter's metaphor for disease reaches its height in a scene straight from the novella *Who Goes There* by John W. Campbell (who used the *nom de plume* Don Stuart). The only way to determine who has been infected by the Thing is with a blood test. What could be more appropriate in contemporary America? It is the blood test that detects hepatitis and AIDS, after all; the blood test that determines what is really going inside the human body. *The Thing* takes advantage of that fact, and offers its most suspenseful set piece as MacReady tests the blood of his compatriots. Eduard Guerrero saw the blood test sequence, and indeed the entire scenario of *The Thing*, as a direct reference to the mysterious AIDS epidemic that was unfolding in America:

Once the person is absorbed by the Thing, it dissembles flawlessly while spreading and taking over the bodies of other victims. In this sense, the monster's mode of operation clearly parallels the AIDS virus' geometric spread ... [T]he great fear that drives much of the film's action is that of not being able to detect those who have been penetrated and replicated by the thing.¹⁵

Guerrero believed that *The Thing* was actually a metaphor for the homosexual lifestyle, noting that the all-male cast of characters lived in a self-indulgent (pot-smoking, alcohol-using) same-sex liberal lifestyle. Thus they were open to "infection." While this interpretation

may be pushing the matter a bit, it is clear that the film's monster can be seen as a metaphor for disease, if not AIDS specifically. Carpenter dramatizes this metaphor by depicting the attack of an aggressive infecting force, an extra-terrestrial who can corrupt and compromise the flesh more rapidly and catastrophically than any known disease might.

Carpenter's second thematic strand involves another issue that was gaining notoriety in the early '80s, specifically that a person can appear normal while just under the surface be quite the opposite. Although suburbia was thriving all across America in 1982, there was a growing awareness dawning among many middle-class Americans that they did not really know their neighbors at all. After all, the advent of fast and inexpensive air-flight coupled with the very American tendency to put down roots far away from one's original home assured that people within one suburban development might be morally and ethically separate from the ideals of their neighbors. A traditional conservative from Richmond, Virginia, might unexpectedly find himself living next door to a liberal Yankee from New Jersey. Worse, a normal family might wonder if their next door neighbor was a child molester, a serial killer, a rapist, a Communist, an atheist, et cetera. This uncertainty, this curiosity and obsession with what goes on "next door" created an era wherein people could not necessarily be sure of their neighbors. Call it an undercurrent of paranoia, or even a lack of trust, but it is also the playing field of Carpenter's *The Thing*. Bill Lancaster fashioned a screenplay wherein trust, paranoia, and secrets beneath "normal" appearances are all of great importance.

Trust, specifically, is a concept the film constantly pinpoints. "I don't know who to trust," Blair declares. "Trust's a tough thing to come by these day ... why don't you trust in the Lord?" MacReady replies. Finally, "Nobody trusts anybody any more," MacReady bemoans once the Thing has infiltrated the camp. Division among the ranks has been caused by the fact one of the "neighbors" is not what he appears to be. Blair is unable to trust his neighbors, as it were, and he resorts to violence. By doing so, he is acting as if he is not himself, which generates suspicion on the part of Fuchs and others. Simple, honest motives are taken as deceitful ones. Suspicion builds upon suspicion until each man is an island, and thus a potential victim for the Thing. The inability to trust people just makes the situation worse in the film and that is why, in the final analysis, it is hard for mankind to muster a defense against the monster. If brother cannot trust brother, how can humanity thrive?

Besides documenting the breakdown and perversion of human flesh,

The Thing showcases a pretty clear malfunctioning of the human condition. Everybody becomes so afraid of being “contaminated” by their neighbor that friendship, understanding, love, and trust all die. The titular creature thus breaks both the skin and the heart of man. This high level of paranoia and fear is documented powerfully by Carpenter’s camera. As MacReady discusses how the creature is hiding behind normality, the camera faces a group of men in goggles, snow masks, and hoods. They are all bundled, hidden as it were, from each other, from the audience, and from the camera. They are all hiding behind snow gear, just as the Thing is hiding behind the face of humanity. In a crowd like this, it is not possible to know who to trust, or who is smiling an evil smile beneath a wool scarf.

Just as Howard Hawks’ *The Thing* reflected its time (the 1950s), so does Carpenter’s version reflect its era. In the earlier motion picture, a group of hearty men led by Captain Pat Hendry (Kenneth Tobey) showed camaraderie as they joined together to face an external menace. Riding high off of the victories of World War II, these men believed that ingenuity, teamwork, patriotism, core American values and good old-fashioned American know-how could defeat even the extra-terrestrial menace (James Arness) that threatened them. The men were all of one unified (patriotic) mind, but for the foolish scientist (read: Communist) played by Robert Cornthwaite who wanted to show unnecessary sympathy to the invader.

Carpenter made his *The Thing* in a very different world. The unfortunate era of the yuppie was beginning in America. It was no longer important to be part of a community, to have camaraderie, or to believe in ideals such as patriotism. The new goal was to make as much money as possible, as quickly as possible, and to live only to accumulate more wealth for one’s self. Co-workers were no longer team members, they were competitors. They might show a friendly face on the surface, but underneath, their goal was to get ahead of you, and they would stab you in the back if it meant stock options and a bigger office. And, each one of them might have AIDS ... so by all means do not drink out of their coffee cup, or have sex with them! Thus, in the words of Thomas Doherty the film depicts a societal trend, specifically an:

... interpersonal implosion. Radically destructive of the ethos of the original, the second film features a collection of autonomous, angry, unpleasant and self-interested individuals, as chilly as the stark Antarctic landscape they inhabit. That men could live in close quarters, in total isolation, depending on each other for survival and succor—and not develop a fraternal bond defies ...

dramatic logic.¹⁶

Indeed, the nature of the Americans at the Antarctic camp does defy dramatic logic. Instead, it reflects a different ethos: a didactic one. The “heroes” and their environment represent a microcosm for 1980s America. It is a world where an invisible but terminal disease can destroy without warning, and nobody trusts their neighbor for fear that they are “infected” with the plague. The film has relevance at the same time that it breaks social convention by dramatizing, in the most visceral terms imaginable, extreme violence and destruction.

Because *The Thing* ends with no clear-cut winner (imagine that in the 1980s!) it also offers no easy answers to difficult questions, and confounds audience expectations. Audiences do not know if the Thing is alive or dead, and so they leave the theater with a sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Jonathan Lake Crane called the movie...

... a perfect example of a film designed to disturb ... audience members who still want to watch decent men triumph over evil in exciting but utterly predictable showdowns. *The Thing* is exquisitely constructed to deny every attempt, from the pathetic to the brilliant, on the part of its supposed protagonists, to master their world. Every moment that would have assured success in earlier eras is marked by total failure ... Logic, or more broadly, knowledge, refuses to operate the way it used to.¹⁷

All of these thematic touches, from the “frailty of the flesh” to the paranoia and uncertainty of the climax, make it John Carpenter’s scariest picture by a long shot. Not only for what it so graphically shows, but for what it suggests about man’s physical and emotional weaknesses.

Venom

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sterling Hayden (Howard Anderson); Klaus Kinski (Mueller/Jacmel); Sarah Miles (Dr. Marion Stowe); Cornelia Shape (Ruth Hopkins); Nicol Williamson (Commander William Bulloch); Susan George (Louise Andrews); Lance Holcomb (Phillip Hopkins); Oliver Reed (Dave); Mike Gwilym (Detective Constable Spencer); Michael Gough (David Ball); Rita Webb(Mrs. Lowenthal); Hugh Lloyd (Taxi Driver); John Forbes-Robertson (Sgt. Nash); Edward Hardwicke (Lord

Dunning); Ian Brimble (Constable in Police Station); Peter Porteous (Hodges); Maurice Colbourne (Sampson); Moti Makan (Mr. Murkejee); Paul Williamson (Detective Sgt. Glazer).

CREW: Morrison Film Group Presents a Martin Bregman Production. *Executive Producer:* Richard R. St. Johns. *Associate Producer:* Harry Benn. *Film Editor:* Michael Bradsell. *Art Director:* Tony Curtis. *Director of Photography:* Gilbert Taylor. *Additional Photography:* Denys Coop. *Music Composed and Conducted by:* Michael L. Kamen. *Senior Executive Producer:* Louis A. Stroller. *Based on the novel by:* Alan Scholefield. *Screenplay by:* Robert Carrington. *Casting:* Maude Spector. *Producer:* Martin Bregman. *Directed by:* Piers Haggard. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A maid named Louise (George), her criminal boyfriend Jacmel (Kinski) and a chauffeur (Reed) conspire to kidnap Phillip (Holcomb), the asthmatic young son of a wealthy American family living in a London row house.

Meanwhile, ten-year-old Phillip receives a venomous Black Mamba snake from the pet shop of Mrs. Lowenthal (Webb) rather than the harmless African one he had hoped for.

A scientist at the department of toxicology, Miriam Stowe (Miles) notifies the police about the situation, but it is too late. Once released into the house, the snake poisons and kills Louise, and then escapes into the house's vent system. Despite the attack, Dave and Jacmel hold the boy and his grandfather, Howard Anderson (Hayden), hostage, even killing a policeman in a confrontation.

Commander William Bulloch (Williamson) arrives on the scene with Dr. Stowe to warn the hostage-takers about the dangerous snake, but Jacmel succeeds in capturing Stowe and bringing her into the house. Bulloch attempts to get in through an old stable entrance, even as the snake continues to prowl, killing the people trapped in the house.

COMMENTARY: For easy reference, *Venom* is sort of like *Die Hard* (1988) with a snake. Piers Haggard, the director of *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1970), stages a British siege story in which a youngster and his grandfather are taken hostage by crooks, only to find that a Black Mamba—in the Bruce Willis role—is on the premises too, making mischief. The snake even crawls through a vent shaft at one point.

For reasons only his agent could possibly answer, Oliver Reed

appeared in two snake movies in the 1980s, this one and the dreadful *Spasms* (1983). *Venom* is actually the superior film, and quite gory at times. After Louise, played by *Straw Dogs* (1971) star Susan George, is stung on her face by the Black Mamba, the camera watches as her legs grow numb, she can't breathe, her neck turns blue, she convulses and finally bleeds from the mouth and dies. In that order. It's not a pretty sight.

Outside (just like in *Die Hard*), the police attempt to negotiate an arrangement that will end the hostage situation, but in this case, they no doubt realize that a Black Mamba is much more dangerous, even than Bruce Willis. True, it can't wisecrack, but *Venom* does provides much intimidating data about this animal. To wit: It's the most dangerous snake in the world, as well as an "unpredictable" and "paranoid" creature, though what a snake could possibly be paranoid about is anyone's guess. The Black Mamba is also the fastest snake in the world and can leap fifteen or twenty feet at a time. The bites from these snakes are always lethal, death arriving within fifteen minutes. All of this information makes the serpent seem quite a danger. Amusingly, Haggard stages multiple snake "fake alarms" as the cast members mistake a shadow, an electrical cord, a curtain and other normal objects for the serpent.

But honestly, audiences will be rooting for the snake to take out the insane Klaus Kinski, the film's real villain. And also probably feel sad when the snake dies wrestling with him.

It would be as though John McClane fell off the building with Hans Gruber...

Visiting Hours

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lee Grant (Deborah Ballin); William Shatner (Gary Baylor); Michael Ironside (Colt Hawker); Linda Purl (Sheila Munroe); Lenore Zann (Lisa); Harvey Atkin (Vinnie Bradshaw); Helen Hughes (Louise Shepherd); Michael J. Reynolds (Porter); Kirsten Bishopric (Denise); Debra Kirschenbaum (Connie Weyler); Elizabeth Leigh Milne (Patricia Ellis); Maureen McRae (Elizabeth Hawker); Dustin Waln (Mr. Hawker); Neil Affleck (Police Officer).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox, Pierre David and Victor Solnicki present a

Film Plan International Production. *Art Director*: Michel Proulx. *Film Editors*: Jean Claude Lord, Lise Thouin. *Music composed and arranged by*: Jonathan Goldsmith. *Director of Photography*: Rene Verzier. *Executive Producers*: Pierre David, Victor Solnicki. *Screenplay*: Brian Taggert. *Producer*: Claude Heroux. *Directed by*: Jean Claude Lord. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You’ve ... triggered ... a psychopath.”—William Shatner (in a thankless role) to Lee Grant in *Visiting Hours*.

SYNOPSIS: Crusading TV news anchor Deborah Ballin (Grant) is brutally attacked by psychopath Colt Hawker (Ironside) after making an impassioned case against male brutality and the inequities of the law on her national TV program. She is rushed to County General Hospital, where she befriends a kindly nurse named Sheila Munroe (Purl).

Colt hasn’t finished his crusade to silence the woman and masquerades as a florist to gain entrance to the hospital, where he begins to kill patients and staff. Sheila watches over Deborah and draws the ire of Colt, who follows her home and plans to use her as a decoy to get at Ballin. He stabs her, sending her to the hospital. While Ballin’s producer Gary (Shatner) promises her that everything will be okay, Hawker tries his most daring gambit yet to get at Ballin, injuring himself intentionally and then regaining admittance to County General ... as a patient. Hawker chases Ballin through the bowels of the hospital, his anger unsated...

COMMENTARY: Although it wears its crude sexual politics on its sleeve, *Visiting Hours* remains a tense entry in the slasher cycle, one made unusual by the fact that it features full-blown adults rather than teenagers, and also because it attempts to make misogyny its subject matter, rather than merely an accusation against the genre in its entirety.

The film concerns a serial killer named Colt Hawker, played by Michael Ironside. In his youth, he saw his mother throw boiling water on her father, and he’s never been the same since. This transgression has made Hawker, as an adult, care for his bitter father, so his mother has actually given him two reasons to hate women, according to the movie.

Visiting Hours uses as its organizing principle the hospital where much of the action takes place. The hospital provides a title, an ad line (“so frightening you’ll never recover”), a victim base of attractive nurses,

and patients, including his primary target, a crusading news anchor played by Lee Grant. The hospital provides the locale of the final chase too, so it's an efficient motif.



TV journalist Deborah Ballin (Lee Grant) is rushed into surgery after a vicious attack by a slasher in *Visiting Hours* (1982).

Useless authority rears its head in the form of inefficient policeman who don't catch on to Hawker's game until it is much too late. But what differentiates *Visiting Hours* from the pack is not just the fact that the hospital is populated in a realistic fashion (unlike the skeleton staff of *Halloween II*) but the killer acts by a fairly consistent set of motives. The movie diagrams, in graphic terms, his opinion of women and then lands him in combat with three examples of contemporary womanhood. The first is his girlfriend, someone he abuses. She eventually betrays him, and rightfully so, but she's the kind of woman Colt can share a relationship with: She's pliable and he can dominate her. Linda Purl gives a charming performance as the second woman in Colt's life, a professional nurse named Sheila. This relationship is defined by the fact that she is a kindly, forthright and competent woman who will fight back, but whom Colt wishes to make a victim (like his girlfriend). Thus he visits her home, and—in a terrifying scene—threatens her family.

Finally, there's the main relationship in the film, which involves Lee Grant's Deborah Ballin, a TV star, and Colt. She's a "strong, independent woman" according to her boyfriend, Shatner, and she's also a bleeding heart liberal, protecting the civil rights of those she thinks have been treated unfairly by the system. She's rich, powerful and, most importantly, influential. This is a state that Colt can't tolerate. He has a drive and obsession to victimize Deborah because, relatively speaking, she's more important in society than he is. When he gets to her, before he tries to kill her, he tries to talk to her and force his viewpoints on her. She's the most dangerous woman in his life because she's not an easy victim.

Although occasionally *Visiting Hours'* not-so-subtle feminist agenda gets uncomfortably schmaltzy ("I admire the hell out of you!" Sheila enthuses to Deborah in one cheesy exchange), the film makes a valuable point about a world where there's still a glass ceiling, and where many men, indeed, "are afraid" of a woman who can assert herself and succeed in the male-dominated world.

The 1980s was a conservative decade in many ways, but in other crucial ways, such as women in the workforce, it was a turning point. Reagan put Sandra Day O'Connor on the Supreme Court in 1981, and

the first woman justice also became arguably the most powerful jurist in the nation for over two decades. Yet who can deny there are still those forces in society who resent women who try to chart their own destinies, without the support of a man. As late as 2005, Senator Rick Santorum's book *It Takes a Family* called women who wanted to work outside the home "selfish." Whenever there are social advances, there's also blowback. In the movies, that blowback is Colt.

Visiting Hours doesn't rely on laziness or the slasher conventions to make its killings compelling. Colt is smart and resourceful, but also prone to mistakes. He botches his first attempt to kill Deborah, a sequence in her house involving a dumbwaiter that puts the audience on edge. This bravura opening gives way to some fine characterization so that by the time the kindly Sheila has taken a scalpel to the gut near the finale, the audience feels the blow. When Colt next starts snapping pictures of the wounded Sheila lying before him to add to his strange "collage," the audience is sickened. Ironside is effective in the role too, pudgy, sweaty, focused, deranged and mean. The lesson for horror moviemakers here, particularly in relation to Linda Purl's characterization, is that interesting, well-rounded characters, like Sheila here and Kate Mulgrew's in *A Stranger Is Watching* (1982), enhance the fear factor. Big-breasted screaming teen girls are fine, but generally not so effective as a more complex, real character.



Psychotic killer Colt Hawker (Michael Ironside) finally gets his hands on Deborah (Grant) during a tense moment in *Visiting Hours*.

Some critics find *Visiting Hours* tiresome because so much of the film follows Colt Hawker's failed attempts to kill Deborah. In response, it's plain that *Visiting Hours* is attempting to be realistic. Ironside doesn't play a serial killer who can twist a head off at the neck, or snap bones. He can't decapitate three people with one swing of a machete, and defying the slasher paradigm, he isn't always standing in exactly the place he needs to be to hack the right victim. He's a flawed, psychologically disturbed human being, and that means that he's not infallible. Unfortunately, many horror movie admirers prefer their bogeyman's anonymous, a killing force (like the shark in *Jaws*) without personality or deficit killing teenagers from now until kingdom come, always resurrected for one last scare.

While still a slasher film, *Visiting Hours* bucks the prevailing trends of the days, and is also quite harrowing. The film's final battle pits a wounded female patient (Deborah) against a hobbled serial killer who has injured his arm (Colt) and it's a toss-up which of them will prevail. Deborah wins by keeping her cool head (a final woman!) by facing each situation with clarity and cleverness. She's come a long way, baby.

1983

January 1: 11.5 million people in American are unemployed.

January 3: Atop the Billboard Charts: Michael Jackson's Thriller. After 37 weeks at the top slot, it is officially the best-selling album of all time.

*February 28: The finale of the TV sitcom M*A*S*H (after eleven seasons on the air) draws a record 125 million viewers.*

March 23: President Reagan tells the nation about his Star Wars program, SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative), a wholly fictional weapons system intended to shoot down incoming nuclear missiles.

April 15: Tax day. And the premiere of Flashdance, starring Jennifer Beals, directed by Adrian Lyne. This film set the fashion trend in the country (off-the-cuff sweatshirts) and was also one of the first films constructed almost entirely of music video-style scenes. On the same day, Sam Raimi's first horror film, The Evil Dead, gets released.

June 18: Sally Ride is the first American female in space during a voyage of the space shuttle Challenger.

July 4: On Independence Day, Reverend Jerry Falwell says that AIDS is "the gay plague," divine retribution from God.

August 3: According to The New York Times, the poverty rate in America rises to 15 percent, the highest in 20 years.

August 31: Two hundred and sixty-nine passengers on a South Korean commercial 747 are killed when the Soviet Union shoots down the plane for accidentally violating its airspace.

October 23: Two hundred and forty-one U.S. Marines are murdered when a terrorist truck bomb destroys their compound in Beirut, Lebanon.

October 25: On the orders of President Reagan, American troops invade Grenada, a tiny Caribbean nation, on a mission to rescue American medical students and stop the spread of Communism.

November 20: ABC airs The Day After starring Jo Beth Williams and Jason Robards. Directed by Nicholas Meyer, the film depicts the fallout in heartland America (Kansas) after a devastating nuclear exchange between superpowers. The Day After garners incredible ratings, sobers a nation, and even catches the eye of President Reagan.

December 2: Michael Jackson's Thriller, a fifteen-minute video featuring zombie makeup (and the voice of genre icon Vincent Price), premieres on MTV.

December 12: Terrorists bomb the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait.

December 19–20: Donald Rumsfeld is President Reagan's emissary to Saddam Hussein, dictator of Iraq, to open diplomatic relations. He is the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Iraq in six years.

Amityville 3-D



Critical Reception

“There’s nothing new here, and there’s no real underlying rationale for what’s going on.”—Kim Holston and Tom Winchester, *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Film Sequels, Series and Remakes*, McFarland and Company, 1997, page 34.

“Ragbag of supernatural incident with neither cohesion nor plausibility but good 3-D.”—Leslie Halliwell, *Halliwell’s Film Guide, Seventh Edition*, Harper & Row, 1991, page 35.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tony Roberts (John Baxter); Tess Harper (Nancy Baxter); Robert Joy (Dr. Elliott West); Candy Clark (Melanie); John Beal (Harold Caswell); Leora Dana (Emma Caswell); John Harkin (Clifford Sanders); Lori Laughlin (Susan Baxter); Meg Ryan (Lisa); Neill Barry (Jeff); Pete Kowanko (Roger); Rikke Borge (Elliott’s Assistant).

CREW: An Orion Pictures Release, Dino De Laurentiis presents a Richard Fleischer film. *Music:* Howard Blake. *Film Editor:* Frank J. Urioste. *Director of Photography:* Fred Schuler. *Written by:* William Wales. *Producer:* Stephen F. Kesten. *Casting:* Feuer & Ritzer. *Costume Designer:* Clifford Capone. *3-D Coordinator:* Tibor Sands. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Michael Wood. *Optical Visual Effects:* Gary Platek, JEX effects. *Stunt Coordinator:* Chris Howell. *Makeup Illusions:* John Caglione, Jr. *Directed by:* Richard Fleischer. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

INCANTATION: “That house has its own mystique. Things happen in there because people expect them to happen.”—John Baxter (Tony

Roberts) attempt to debunk the Amityville house in the third installment of the haunted house series, *Amityville 3-D*.

SYNOPSIS: *Reveal* magazine journalist John Baxter (Roberts) buys the haunted Amityville house on Long Island for a song after revealing that some of the séances taking place there are actually a hoax. On the day he moves in, his real estate agent, Sanders (Harkin), dies mysteriously in the house of an apparent stroke. Oddly, photographs of Harkin taken by Baxter's co-worker Melanie (Clark) are distorted, as if some force had marked him for death. Melanie herself is killed in a burning car before she can show Baxter the photos. Days later, Baxter's daughter, Susan (Laughlin) and her friend, Lisa (Ryan) take some teen boys into the house to play with a makeshift Ouija board, and Susan dies that afternoon in a bizarre drowning accident. Now Baxter's estranged wife Nancy (Harper) is convinced that Susan's spirit is trapped in the house, and Baxter seeks the help of his friend and associate, Dr. Elliott West (Joy), a psychical investigator. West and a team of hi-tech ghost hunters attempt to free Susan and determine if the house is haunted, and discover that the force of evil seems to be emanating from a well in the basement that may just double as the gateway to Hell. Susan's spirit calls out to Nancy, drawing her to the well, but Elliott West intervenes just as the infamous house begins to tear itself apart.

COMMENTARY: For all its flaws, at least *Amityville II: The Possession* had the good sense to select a narrative and stick with it. *Amityville 3-D*'s makers had no such foresight, and instead present a film with a half-dozen blind alleys and competing plot lines. It's a stew of nonsense that never coheres into anything interesting.

On one hand, there's the narrative involving young Susan Baxter, played by Lori Laughlin. Echoing the aesthetic of the slasher paradigm, Susan and her friends transgress by playing a game of Ouija in the notorious Amityville house. A young Meg Ryan portrays Susan's more naughty buddy. Boyfriends and plans to party are also introduced. After Susan drowns off-screen, neither Ryan's character, Lisa, nor the other young adults are seen again. Everything involving them just stops cold.



Skeptic John Baxter (Tony Roberts) and estranged wife Nancy (Tess Harper) flee their haunted house as it rips itself apart around them in *Amityville 3-D*.

Another plot thread involves the beautiful and talented Candy Clark. She plays the film's most appealing character, Melanie. Forecasting the horror of *The Ring* (2002), Melanie develops a series of photographs revealing who will be the house's next victim. After bravely soldiering on in her own subplot, Melanie dies—burned to death in her car—and her story is hardly developed further.

Then there are the numerous sequences involving hi-tech ghost hunters, which seem to have been excavated entirely from *Poltergeist* (1982) and *The Entity* (1983). Elliott West is the smarty-pants psychical researcher who stays above the fray for most of the film's running time, but is kind enough to provide crucial information about Susan's spirit near the climax. He also suffers a nasty fate at the basement well, though why this horror is reserved for a supporting character remains unclear.

Yet *Amityville 3-D* still isn't finished. There's the story of the failed Baxter marriage, a *cul-de-sac* about Susan's spirit attempting to warn everybody about the evil house, and even a few references here and there to the Di Feo family—the *real* Amityville family, not the

fictionalized Montellis as featured in *The Possession*. All of this material is vetted with grim-faced seriousness, and the score by Howard Blake telegraphs every terror and lacks nuance or charm. Where's Lalo Schifrin's haunting *Amityville Horror* theme when you need it?

The year 1983 was also the year of 3-D, as two horror franchises (*Jaws* and *Amityville*) sought to buttress their cinematic terrors with the suddenly re-popularized technology. *Amityville* 3-D presents a three-dimensional Frisbee thrown at the camera, and lots of 3-D flies buzzing about. One of those flies appears to be dangling on the end of a fishing rod as it bobs up and down.

The 3-D effect adds little to the overall film; in fact, the special effects overall are rather weak. For instance, the destruction of the house is a cheapjack affair. Furniture and other items fly at the camera, a chandelier falls (again at the camera), and the house actually blows up. Then the house explodes in miniature until nothing remains but that burning well in the basement, the one stretching down, apparently, all the way to Hell. The film's last shot is a freeze frame of a malevolent fly at that bubbling well. No doubt that little insect feels like the viewer at this point: We've all been to that well once too often...

The Being



Cast and Crew

CAST: Martin Landau (Garson Jones); Jose Ferrer (Mayor Gordon Lane); Dorothy Malone (Marge Smith); Ruth Buzzi (Virginia Lane); Marianne Gordon (Laurie); Rexx Coltrane/Johnny Commander (Detective Mortimer Lutz); Murray Langston (Arn); Kinky Friedman (Willis); Johnny Dark (John); Kent Perkins (Officer Dudley); Ellen Blake (Jenny); Roxanne Cybelle Osco (Suzie); Jerry Maren (Monster); Eric Helland, Bill Rawlinson (Dopers); Nancy Osco (Woman Motorist); Tracy Barry (Newswoman).

CREW: A Bill Osco Production of a Jackie Kong Film. *Costume Designer:* Sarah Bardo. *Associate Producer:* Kent Perkins. *Director of Photography:* Robert Ebinger. *Makeup and Special Effects:* Mark Bussan. *Music composed and realized by:* Don Preston. *Editorial Supervision:* David Newhouse. *Produced by:* William Osco. *Special Effects:* John

Eggett. *Special Effects Makeup*: Tom Shouse. *Written and Directed by*: Jackie Kong. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 82 minutes.

INCANTATION: “It’s conceivable it can use a higher percentage of its brain...”—which is why *The Being* is superior to all the human characters in the film...

SYNOPSIS: A strange and deadly creature is killing the residents of Pottsville, Idaho, much to the chagrin of the dedicated Detective Mortimer Luntz (Coltrane). He investigates a brutal killing in a drive-in and then finds some odd green goop in his bedroom, but Mayor Lane (Ferrer) doesn’t want to know anything about it, and a government chemist, Garson Jones (Landau), wants to keep the attacks hush-hush. In fact, the creature has been spawned by a local nuclear waste dump, and both the mayor and Jones are trying to keep it a secret, since there are 52,000 such dumps all over America. The monster continues its rampage, attacking the mayor’s crusader wife, Virginia (Ruth Buzzi). Garson Jones and Mortimer Luntz face the creature down on its home territory, inside the nuclear dump. There, in a pitched battle, one man won’t survive the battle with the one-eyed monstrosity.

COMMENTARY: The 1980s was also the last age of the gloriously bad, low-budget horror stinker.

Today, really bad horror movies cost a lot of money to make...

Written and directed by Jackie Kong, the thriller about a terrifying “monster” spawned by nuclear power, called *The Being*, opens promisingly, before immediately going right downhill.

The opening shot is a moody, nicely composed slice of Americana. It’s dusk in the midwest, and the old-fashioned street lights are activated as it grows dark in a small town. The sky is a bright apricot shade but fading fast, and a slow, steady zoom brings the on-edge audience closer to the main drag.

Then a voice-over begins to describe this small town—Pottsville, Idaho—and one is instantly reminded of the brilliant opening of *It Came from Outer Space*, which also involved a scenic town (although in that case, one in Arizona), and a narration introducing the community’s inhabitants.

But all thoughts of classic films quickly fly out the window after the next scene. A kid is chased through a dark junkyard and something slimy attacks him from atop a junked car. I couldn’t see what it was,

but I knew it was slimy. Then there was a gory decapitation sequence, and—again—I couldn't see that event real well, either.

And from there, *The Being* just falls apart. Fresh from his stint as a nutcase in *Without Warning* and a lunatic in *Alone in the Dark*, Martin Landau plays a nefarious (and ultimately bonkers) government chemist who insists that dumping nuclear waste in the nearby reservoir will not contaminate anybody. Why, you get more radiation from watching TV, he suggests! I appreciated his bald-faced, sneering lies, and felt that this very realistic bureaucrat could be heading the E.P.A. or FEMA under President George W. Bush. He could lead the “Clear Skies” initiative, or some such thing. Or maybe the Nuclear Regulatory Commission?

As *The Being* continues—out of the blue—Ruth Buzzi from *The Lost Saucer* shows up. She’s the mayor’s wife, and on a campaign against pornography or some such thing. Fortunately, she’s killed in short order, strangled by a tentacle.

Next, the film’s protagonist, a detective grandiosely monikered Mortimer Luntz, begins sharing with the audience his deepest inner thoughts via a voice-over monologue.

“Something’s freaky around here. Wish I could put my finger on it...”

Let me put *my* finger on it: This is a bad movie.

And it just keeps going...

By the thirty-minute point, the movie has consisted wholly of several seemingly random scenes of people being attacked: a kid, an old lady, and so on.

Then comes the kicker, a black-and-white dream sequence in which a monster attacks Landau and Lutz while they are inexplicably flying a plane together.

Finally, when you think the movie can’t get any wackier, Ruth Buzzi flies by and warns the men, “It’s all in your mind, boys. It’s all in your mind.”

Would that her warning were true...

In its own fumble-bumble way, *The Being* captures the Zeitgeist of the era in which it was made. There’s a fear of nuclear power and nuclear waste in the film’s plot line (a fear also evidenced in *The Dead Zone*

[1983], *Dreamscape* [1984] and *Burndown* [1989]), and there's a secret governmental conspiracy to keep the truth from the public.

Sadly—and also like a lot of 1980s horror films—there's also a load of crap. Not one scene generates the slightest scare, and the monster is a pretty immobile thing who seems to be wheeled around from locale to locale.

The Being—which in some instances is marketed under alternate titles such as *Easter Sunday* (so as to better exploit the holiday horror movie genre like *April Fool's Day* and *My Bloody Valentine*...), the terse *Freak* and the relatively intriguing-sounding *The Pottsville Horror*—remains a bad movie under any title. The film's final battle occurs in a warehouse and is poorly staged, the monster design and execution is terrible and the dialogue—ouch!

Yet despite these deficits, one must reserve most of the criticism for the actors who flail about so badly in the film. There isn't a single well-modulated performance to be found. No degree of subtlety or charm. Nothing of the sort.

In fact, the best way to enjoy *The Being* is to consider it in terms of actor Martin Landau's up-and-down career. After the high-water marks of TV series such as *Mission: Impossible* (1966–1969) and the British-made *Space: 1999* (1975–1977), the actor fell into hard-times professionally, a period this book explores rather fully. Landau starred in bad disaster films such as *Meteor* (1979), but then things got even worse as he headlined a group of Z-grade horror movie films, including *Without Warning* (1980), *Alone in the Dark* (1982) and the worst of the lot, *The Being*. I rather like the other two...

However, this is all prelude to Landau's remarkable career resurgence in the late 1980s with such high-profile "A" pictures such as *Tucker: The Man and His Dreams* (1987), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) with Woody Allen and Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994). Martin Landau won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor playing Bela Lugosi in that last film, and one has to wonder about that. As he was accepting his Academy Award ... could Landau have been thinking of ... *The Being*? Of daft dream sequences played opposite Ruth Buzzi? And a character named Mortimer Luntz? Of taking direction from Jackie Kong?

Naaaah!

Historical note: Jackie Kong's *The Being* should not be confused with the 1979 horror film of the same title. Nor with *The Being From*

Another Planet (1982)—aka *Time Walker*—which starred Shari Belafonte and was roasted by the crew of the Satellite of Love on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. That one concerned a Mummy from outer space who wanted to “phone home” and threatened to turn college students into green fungus.

In case you were wondering...

A Blade in the Dark

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Andrea Occhipinti (Bruno); Amy Papa (Sandra); Fabrola Toledo (Angela); Michele Soavi (Tony); Velria Cavalli (Katia); Stanko Molnar (Giovanni); Lara Naszinski (Julia).

CREW: A National Cinematografica, Nuova Dania Cinematografica production. *Film Editor:* Lamberto Bava. *Designs and Costumes:* Stefano Paltrinieri. *Special Effects:* Corridori Giovanni. *Director of Photography:* Gianlorenzo Battaglia. *Makeup:* Giovannia Amadei. *Music:* Guido Mauricio De Angeles. *Story and Screenplay:* Dardano Sacchetti, Elisa Briganti. *Directed by:* Lamberto Bava. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Bruno (Occhipinti), composing a score for a horror movie, rents a villa to complete his work and meets a strange neighbor, Katia (Cavalli), who knows a secret about the villa’s odd previous tenant. Katia is killed by a mad slasher with a razor blade before she can share it. Bruno soon hears odd whispers and movements on the estate and investigates and find nothing save for a groundskeeper moving a heavy trash bag.

Bruno’s girlfriend, Julia (Naszinski) shows up, and so does Katia’s roommate, Angela ... who is promptly murdered. Sandra, a movie director, investigates these deaths with Bruno, and fears the murderer may be Linda, the previous tenant Sandra knew years ago and based her movie’s screenplay on.

COMMENTARY: *A Blade in the Dark* is a fairly involving, competent example of the *giallo*, a violent, crime-oriented subgenre popularized by the Italians and believed to be the origin of the slasher film. Lamberto Bava, who would soon direct the energetic *Demons* (1985), does a fine job with the movie, which from time to time dredges up a

dazzling visual or two. I guess it all comes down to a matter of taste, however, because—although I admire the cinematic imagery in these films—the stories rarely make sense and the characters don’t resemble any variation of the human species I’ve ever seen. Maybe that’s a characteristic of the *giallo*, or maybe something gets lost in translation, but I always emerge from these films with more questions than answers.

For instance, why is it that in Italian slasher films like these, characters often just wait around to die and don’t put up a fight? Katia is stabbed, slashed and gouged through a wire barrier in her final scene. She never tries to grab or deflect the weapon as it slowly and methodically probes through the metal wire openings. She just obligingly dies. Violently. This seems a distinct contrast to the final girls of American slashers, and hardly feels realistic. A trapped animal or human has that fight-or-flight instinct, not a lie-down-and-die attitude.

Katia confuses me anyway. She meets composer Bruno after hiding in his villa’s closet. Once discovered, she comes on to him. She tells him that she thinks musicians are good in bed and then asks to use his bathroom. Then she leaves the house and gets killed. So why feature her flirting with Bruno? Why did she leave the bathroom and the house without another word, after indicating she wanted to sleep with Bruno? Why was a woman hiding in his villa’s closet in the first place? The whole set-up is very bizarre and doesn’t bear any relation to reality as I understand it. It’s necessary to introduce victims in a film like this, but why do so in such an odd, unrealistic manner?

A Blade in the Dark also features the point-of-view subjective shot so frequently that the film is at times, well, snoozy. Still, it would be foolish not to acknowledge that Bava has a knack for showcasing unusual imagery. For instance, there’s a scene with a razor knife at the bottom of a glittering swimming pool, and Bava accents its prominence and importance in his composition by shooting it in the frame’s foreground. This means that the camera is actually stationed below the knife, shooting up through the pool, at the surface. That’s inventive and interesting staging, and it certainly must have been challenging to shoot. And truly, one has to be impressed with a movie that features tennis balls as a critical clue in uncovering a serial killer suffering from “regressed masculinity.”

Gender identity is a big issue in 1980s horror films (see *Sleepaway Camp* for another example) and that’s also the case in *A Blade in the Dark*. This giallo also treads on the notion that “the difference

between fantasy and reality is often minimal.” To that end, it showcases a movie reel (that Bruno is scoring) as another critical clue in the murder mystery. The movie opens with views of this reel, meaning the audience is watching a movie within a movie, a terrain Lamberto Bava would return to in *Demons*. Later, Bruno plays a haunting melody based on the movie-within-a-movie and the director cuts to a slow pan over the artist’s musical recording equipment, close-ups of gauges, buttons and the like. This shot, along with the broadcasting of the movie reel, underlies the film’s thesis, that “daylight cancels the monsters.” A person with a terrible, traumatic past uses the format of the movies, including the Bruno-composed soundtrack, to make that past palatable. Bruno becomes enmeshed in this mystery and comes to realize the importance of the movie he is working on.

His investigation comes to a head in a scary, suspenseful scene at film’s end, as a killer becomes clear in the house (at the top of the stairs) just as little boys were at the top of the staircase in a scene from the film-within-a-film. Sandra and Bruno, at the bottom of the stairs, detect the killer’s shadow, and a heartbeat thumps on the soundtrack. In moments like this (with the killer’s shadow looming behind a curtain ... or not), *A Blade in the Dark* works well despite its improbabilities and blatant unrealism. But a movie like this, one where characters are introduced only to be murdered seconds later, are really an acquired taste. If you’re reading this book, you no doubt already know whether it’s your cup of tea.

Boogeyman II



Cast and Crew

CAST: Suzanna Love (Lacey); Shannah Hall (Bonnie); Ulli Lommel (Mickey); Sholto Von Douglas (Joseph); Rob Rosenfarb (Bernie); Rhonda Aldrich (Cynthia); Sarah Jean Watkins (Kathy); Rock MacKenzie (Jim); Rafael Nazario (Harvey); Leslie Smith (Miss Arizona); Mina Kolb (Agent); Ann Wilkinson (Priscilla); David D’Arnel (Sandor). In flashbacks: John Carradine (Dr. Warren); Ron James (Jake); Nicholas Love (Willie); Felicite Morgan (Helen); Bill Rayburn (Ernest); Llewelyn Thomas (Father Reilly).

CREW: *Presented by:* Ulli Lommel. *Cinematographer:* Phillip Carr-Forster. *Film Editor:* Terrell Tannen. *Makeup:* Shirley Howard. *Music:*

Tim Krog. *Associate Producers*: Mark Balsam, James Dudelson. *Executive Producers*: David Dubay, Jochen Breitenstein. *Associate Director*: Paul Willson. *Produced and Written by*: Ulli Lommel. *Special Effects*: CMI Ltd., Craig Harris. *Directed by*: Bruce Starr. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “In America, exploitation is a genre.”—Film producer Bernie (Bob Rosenfarb) attempts to convince European art director Mickey (Ulli Lommel) to include some skin in his latest film, *Kiss and Tell*, in Lommel’s *Boogeyman II*.

SYNOPSIS: Lacey (Love), survivor of a terrifying supernatural experience with the Boogeyman, pays a visit to her friend Bonnie (Hall) in Hollywood, where her director husband Mickey (Lommel) is busy crafting an exploitation flick with the help of his obnoxious producer, Bernie (Rosenfarb). At great length, Lacey recounts to Mickey and Bonnie her horrifying story about the Boogeyman, and they think she’s had a nervous breakdown. But Lacey proves them wrong by producing a shard of the haunted Boogeyman mirror, which she keeps with her in a small pouch. Bonnie and Mickey decide to exploit Lacey and produce a movie based on her experiences, but the camera-shy Boogeyman possesses their butler. Soon their guests at a pool party—including actresses, agents, and producers—are being murdered left and right with hedge clippers, electric toothbrushes, and even shaving cream.

COMMENTARY: Director “Bruce Starr” would probably appreciate it if, as a reviewer of his film, I stayed on message and discussed the only artistic element of his misbegotten sequel, *Boogeyman II*. I’ll lead with that subject.

For all its inherent clumsiness and silliness, *Boogeyman II* is no doubt an early representative of the self-reflexive horror movie that came to dominate Hollywood following John Carpenter’s *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994) and such Wes Craven ventures as *New Nightmare* (1994) and his popular *Scream* (1996) series.

What that means is, *Boogeyman II* is very aware of its origin “as a movie” and attempts to poke fun at itself and the movie industry in both its dialogue and tongue-in-cheek approach to the material. This means that many of the characters are film industry folk attending a pool party (*Boogeyman II*’s central setting). So they stand around and declare such things as “I’m in distribution.” Notably, these *dramatis personae* are menacingly lit from below so as to cast long, ghoulish shadows over their faces, thus informing the viewer of the film’s

central equation: If you're in the movie industry (distribution or otherwise), you just might be evil.

So, at this most bizarre of pool parties and in this most bizarre of movies, characters whom the filmmakers have hardly taken the time to introduce, gab about how *Halloween* and the slasher trend are old-hat. They discuss how Brian De Palma made an eighteen million dollar bomb with *Blow Out*. The film *Poltergeist* is named too, and there are discussions of turning poor Lacey's story (*Boogeyman I*, as it were) into an exploitative feature film.

"Nobody's going to make a movie about my mirror," Lace protests, but of course, she's overruled.

Is this approach valiant, even pioneering? Ah heck, sure—give it that much credit. But the movie does little with its ideas. The ideas themselves don't make a movie good, it's the way that a movie highlights them, the way it circles its themes and notions.

And *Boogeyman II* plays like a fourth grader's essay on what he learned from his week-long trip to Hollywood, not a serious (or even particularly witty) exposé of the system that cranks out blockbusters.

Instead, the cynicism of Hollywood's movie producers is actually reinforced (rather than exposed) in *Boogeyman II* because Lommel's film is really just a cheap con job. Less than half the film (and that's being generous) consists of new narrative and new footage. The rest is "flashback" (that's Hollywood-ese for "rerun") material from the far superior, but ultimately not-that-good first *Boogeyman* film.

Thus, on watching *Boogeyman II* I had the feeling of *deja vu*. I am a glutton for punishment because I've now seen the first film's ghoulish prologue (in which a little boy stabs his mother's lover), by my estimation, at least 3.5 times in two movies. That's at least three times too many.

Yes, scenes that weren't that good the first time are mercilessly replayed at length in *Boogeyman II*. This grows tiresome and irritating all too quickly, and so the director changes tactics and starts providing inner monologues for characters ... an unintentionally funny touch. These hammy voiceovers are obvious attempts to stop up a leaky plot ... and they fail miserably.

As for the "original" material shot for *Boogeyman II*, it's so bad and so amateurish that it actually defies description. A flashlight is apparently used to light one dim sequence. The murders, which

involve an electric toothbrush that comes to life and a self-propelled corkscrew, are utter travesties.

There's somebody out there reading this who will state that the movie was actually "commenting" on Hollywood's obsession with new and inventive murder weapons in the 1980s franchises like *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. However, that's just an overly generous way of saying the director saved a lot of money on props. One gets the feeling all the new material was shot at a real pool party in one night, using whatever happened to be lying around nearby. And buddy, I think that includes the cocaine...

Boogeyman II is not so much inventive as it is insulting. Don't be misled into thinking you're going to see a professional movie here. This is really just about 33 percent original material, and it's amateur night at that.

Brainstorm

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"[A] bundle of contradictions. Its plot is a great disappointment, and at the same time one of the most provocative of any recent film ... It promises, but it never delivers ... *Brainstorm* is almost redeemed by its special effects."—Hal Goodman, "Storm Without Substance," *Psychology Today*, November 1983, page 79.

"I remember thinking as a kid how weird and ironic it was that Natalie Wood's last film—the production of which was thrown for a loop by her untimely and accidental death—was about a brain recording of a death experience and how everyone in the movie was afraid to play it themselves. Of course, the payoff (the death recording) cannot possibly live up to the anticipation—I'd have preferred that the death experience itself was not dramatized, was left entirely to the viewer's imagination. Still, I love this movie, and I love Christopher Walken, as always."—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Walken (Michael Brace); Natalie Wood (Karen Brace); Louise Fletcher (Dr. Lillian Reynolds); Cliff Robertson (Alex Terson); Jordan Christopher (Forbes); Donald Hotton (Marks); Alan

Fudge (Robert Jenkins); Joe Dorsey (Hal Abramson); Bill Morey (James Zimbach); Darrell Larson (Security); Jason Lively (Chris Brace).

CREW: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer presents a JF Production of a Douglas Trumbull Film. *Executive Producers:* Joel L. Freedman, Jack Grossberg. *Casting:* Lynn Stalmaster, Toni Howard. *Music:* James Horner. *Costume Design by:* Donfeld. *Film Editors:* Edward Warschilka, Freeman Davies. *Production Designer:* John Vallone. *Director of Photography:* Richard Yuricich. *Story:* Bruce Joel Rubin. *Screenplay:* Robert Stitzel, Philip Frank Messina. *Produced and Directed by:* Douglas Trumbull. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 106 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You’ve blown communication as we know it right out of the water!”—An ebullient Alex Terson (Robertson) imagines a profitable future for his company because of Christopher Walken’s invention in *Brainstorm*. But there’s a dark side to the new technology too...

SYNOPSIS: Researchers Michael Brace (Walken) and Lillian Reynolds (Fletcher) experience a breakthrough developing a revolutionary new device that can take impulses from one brain and record them for input into another. While the device (looking like an oversized helmet) is tested, marketed and packaged, Michael is forced to work with his estranged wife, Karen (Wood). Things seem to go fine, until it is determined that the machine can also tape unpleasant experiences ... and that the person watching the recording can see, feel and sense it all.

When Lillian dies of a heart attack, she dons the helmet and records the moment. Michael becomes desperate to see what the helmet device has captured of the moment of non-existence, but ownership of the helmet, and the device itself, becomes a subject of debate for Brace’s company, and ultimately for the U.S. military. Working with his wife, Michael engineers an attempt to get his hands on Lillian’s tape, and finally—once and for all—prepares to experience what she experienced at the moment of her death.

COMMENTARY: The frontiers of science are expanded in *Brainstorm*: Inventors (portrayed by Christopher Walken and Louise Fletcher) construct a device, colloquially called a hat, that records and plays back memory and human sensory experience. When Fletcher’s character dies while wearing a hat, she records the experience, and the film goes on an *Altered States*–*2001: A Space Odyssey*-like sojourn beyond the very boundaries of life itself. Also, *Brainstorm* includes a

personal story about Walken's lovelorn scientist attempting to resurrect his marriage to a character played by Natalie Wood.

At times touching, at times wildly cinematic (particularly in a P.O.V., bird's eye roller coaster sequence), *Brainstorm* appear slightly dated today since the hat is unwieldy-looking, and it records all that trippy imagery on copper-like tape, a technology that appears outdated in the 21st century.

Viewing *Brainstorm*, one gets the sense it was created almost solely to permit special effects director, Douglas Trumbull (*Silent Running* [1972]) and his crew to express their visual imagination with the most advanced cameras available. They take the camera on that roller coaster ride and fly over the Golden Gate Bridge. They hang-glide over sea and land with it, from mountaintop to midair.

And then, depending on perspective, I guess, *Brainstorm* either devolves or climaxes with the ultimate special effects trip, transforming into an impressive sound and light show. The imagery of death begins as organic, goopy, even Hellish, but then quickly grows beautiful as the viewer moves away from Earth, into space. It's a cosmic journey to another galaxy and beyond. And then, there's the moving to a warm and wondrous cosmic light...

Brainstorm, which makes a point of comparing the hat experiments to the early tests of the Wright Bros., also boasts a leitmotif about the wonders and pitfalls of dwelling in memory, of literally living in the past instead of experiencing the present. Like *Strange Days* (1995), *Brainstorm* finds a character (Walken's Michael) dwelling on a failed relationship, and obsessively living in a happier time. He can taste, smell, see every aspect of the days recorded by the hat, and it isn't productive. However, the hat ultimately proves helpful because it doesn't merely record visuals, it records emotional states and feelings. When Karen (Wood) plays the tape of her marriage, she understands and feels for the first time what her husband feels for her. This rekindles the relationship.

The dark side of that equation is that residing in memory can prove a trap. *Brainstorm* depicts two negative incidents based on this concept. In the first, a project colleague of Michael's cuts together a tape that is just one loop of sexual orgasm. Like a narcotic, the pleasure waves it creates in him become addictive. On the second front, Michael's young son inadvertently experiences a tape of a psychotic episode, and so he experiences a mental break with reality. The latter is a horrific notion, and *Brainstorm* raises the specter that the military will indeed have

“applications” for such technology.

From *Altered States* to *Dreamscape* (1984) to *Brainstorm*, many 1980s horror films explored the inner mind, and the way it can carry people to new “rubber reality” realms. *Brainstorm* is not so strong and intense as *Altered States*, nor as abundantly cheesy as *Dreamscape*. The most difficult and fear-provoking scene finds Lillian, the scientist played by Fletcher, undergoing the first twitches of a fatal cardiac episode and—ever the scientist—having the wherewithal to put on the hat and record the episode. As we see Fletcher struggle for breath, the first pangs of pain emanating from her chest, we feel her pain. Watching this splendidly acted and staged scene, I felt a tightness in my breathing too, and realized suddenly that in its finest moments *Brainstorm* mirrors the same capabilities as that silly-looking hat. The movie makes us feel the pain and joy of its characters, and in the end, that’s what makes it a powerful and occasionally disturbing effort.

Christine

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Stephen King gets a good adaptation of his novel, this time by John Carpenter, who wrote a fine score to go along with the mayhem. Scenes of Christine in flames—cruising the streets of middle America after Keith Gordon’s enemies to Carpenter’s music—and some good rock ‘n’ roll make this film worthy of revisiting if you haven’t seen it in awhile. Gordon gives his usual good performance (why didn’t this guy end up as a star?) alongside Robert Prosky, who seems to effortlessly move between films and either be lovable or despicable. In an age when Stephen King adaptations were coming fast and furious, this was one of the keepers.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Keith Gordon (Arnie); John Stockwell (Dennis); Alexandra Paul (Leigh); Robert Prosky (Darnell); Harry Dean Stanton (Junkins); Christine Belford (Regina Cunningham); Roberts Blossom (Le Bay); William Ostrander (Buddy); David Spielberg (Mr. Casey); Malcolm Danare (Moochie); Steven Tash (Rich); Stuart Charno (Vandeberg); Kelly Preston (Roseann); Mark Poppel (Chuck); Michael Cunningham (Robert Darnell); Richard Collier (Pepper Boyd); Bruce French (Mr. Smith); Douglas Warhit (Bemis); Keri Montgomery (Ellie); Jan Burrell

(Librarian).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents from Polar Films, a Richard Kobritz Production. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Associate Producer:* Barry Bernardi. *In Association with:* Alan Howarth. *Co-Producer:* Larry Franco. *Executive Producers:* Kirby McCauley, Mark Tarlov. *Film Editor:* Marion Rothman. *Production Designer:* Daniel Lomino. *Director of Photography:* Donald M. Morgan. *Based upon the novel by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* Bill Phillips. *Producer:* Richard Kobritz. *Music Composer-Director:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a Detroit auto assembly line, a 1958 Fury is born bad. ... murdering a factory worker and injuring another. Thirty years later, young high school student Dennis Guilder (Stockwell) objects when his nerdy buddy Arnie (Gordon) purchases the wrecked old car from a crazy elderly man named George Le Bay (Blossoms). Almost immediately, the car—which is named Christine—has a dramatic effect on Arnie. The fixed-up vehicle gives Arnie the confidence he needs to ask out Leigh (Paul) and she accepts. Later, however, she wishes she hadn't, because Christine tries to kill her out of jealousy. And when a group of bullies from school attempt to destroy the car, it manages to repair itself and kill those who wronged it. And all the while, Arnie is changing, becoming a mirror image of the car's cantankerous former owner. Worried about Arnie, Dennis and Leigh decide it's time to kill Christine once and for all, and prepare for the ultimate showdown between Fury and bulldozer.

COMMENTARY: John Carpenter often refers to *Christine* as his least favorite film project and perhaps that it is not a surprise. Not only was he recovering from *The Thing*'s box office and critical drubbing at the time he directed *Christine*, but he was also facing several other obstacles. The first was *Christine*'s famous author, Stephen King. King is a prolific author and the King of horror fiction, but his often-splendid novels have resulted in terrible films on some occasions. His work is not easy to adapt in the first place and many talented directors have been unsuccessful in translating his scary prose into suspenseful or scary motion pictures. The reasons for this translation difficulty are numerous, and would be a good topic for another book, perhaps.

The short list of problems associated with King adaptations might look like this: Audiences familiar with King's writing bring to the theater high expectations that cannot be met since film is a different art form than novel writing, and certain things/events/characters must be cut or at least condensed. Secondly, most film directors who have taken a shot at King books are themselves artists of an unusually high caliber

and inevitably bring their own ethos, their own senses of style and technique, to a filming of any King story. Thus King's vision is changed, some might say distorted, to accommodate the men or women calling the shots. The result is that the images on screen represent hybrid thinking. *Christine* is King-Carpenter. *The Shining* is King-Kubrick. *The Dead Zone* is King-Cronenberg. For people who just want pure, unadulterated King, this is unacceptable.

Why does *Christine* fail to inspire the same level of dread and terror as *Misery* or *Cujo*? Quite simply, Carpenter is working with a concept that is not scary, or even particularly inventive. Cars are not really a frightening nemesis and *Christine* never recovers from that obvious fact. A dog, a shark, or a human serial killer can all seem truly frightening because each of them has an intellect or at least instinct. An animal like the rabid St. Bernard in *Cujo*, has personality, something distinctly unique about it (relentlessness, compassion, humor, rage, whatever). But a car? No matter what the trappings, it has no personality; it has no instinct; it is merely a device that requires human manipulation. For that reason *Christine* never really comes to life as a horror show. Logically and dramatically, a car as antagonist is problematic plain and simple.



A portrait of Christine at her birth on the assembly line. From John Carpenter's *Christine* (1983).

If being chased by Christine, why not simply run somewhere where she cannot get you like inside a house, on the second floor, in crowds, or off-road? *Christine*'s "chase and kill" sequences are silly because the victim is always seen running right down the middle of a road, with the car in hot pursuit. It is obvious that any person, no matter how fast, cannot outrun a car on open road, so these scenes only point to the inherent ridiculousness of the situation, and the stupidity of the characters under siege. In one inventive passage, Moochie does hide in a narrow alley, where he believes himself impervious to Christine's touch. In a clever move, the car squeezes into the alley and crushes him. If all the scenes had been as unexpected as that one, the film might have worked a little better.

Even though the horror rarely works, Carpenter does his stylistic best to orchestrate the numerous violent set pieces. At one point, Christine catches fire and is seen racing through the black night like a bat out of Hell. It is an awesome sight, the stuff of a surreal nightmare, and it definitely evokes a shiver if not a scream as it burns brightly in the forest of the night. In another memorable moment, the car appears out of nowhere, silent and unmoving. Its blaring radio signals its arrival on the scene, and again there is a palpable chill in the air, if not the electricity of real suspense. These moments, coupled with some real good, "human" performances from leads Keith Gordon, John Stockwell and Alexandra Paul, make the film enjoyable.

Perhaps aware that the horror aspects of his titular villain were particularly lame, Carpenter does an exceptional job of wittily and intelligently handling the non-horror material. *Christine* really seems to exist in the closed-off environment of high school, the world of the dominant, athletic male teenager. Besides capturing the high school lingo perfectly, with mentions of "beating off," fellatio and "getting laid," the film knowingly takes on the perspective of a disenfranchised teenager. Thus the film's characters become paranoid at times, convinced that dark forces (adults?) are working against them.

In fact, *Christine* might be seen as a metaphor for puberty. Arnie is at first awkward, clumsy and nerdy. As he reaches adulthood, his appearance and reputation improve, but he also becomes cold and distant, as if he has been assimilated into the uncaring world of adulthood. His car is not the only thing that has possessed him; his stature as "grown-up" has done the same. As Dennis declares near the climax, "I don't think Arnie is Arnie any more." In rebelling against his parents, he is changed into a lifeless old creature akin to his parents.

Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of the film is Carpenter's light, witty touch on the soundtrack. He uses music humorously and so each 1950s be-bop song from *Christine*'s radio comments ironically on the situation dramatized. When Christine is being assembled in 1958, she kills a factory worker to the tune "Bad to the Bone" by The Destroyers ("On the day I was born, I was bad to the bone"). When Christine flattens fat old Mr. Darnell between her seat cushions and the dashboard, the radio blares "Bony Marrone" by Larry Williams, a song about a skinny girl. When Dennis tries unsuccessfully to break into the hell car, the soundtrack responds with "Keep a Knockin'" by Little Richard ("I hear you knockin', but you can't come in").

To dramatize Arnie's love for Christine, Carpenter selects "We Belong Together" ("I'll forever love you, for the rest of my days"). And finally, when there is the threat that Christine might return from the grave, Carpenter chooses "Rock 'N' Roll Is Here to Stay" by Danny and The Juniors. The song establishes that rock 'n' roll music, like Christine, "will never die. It was meant to be that way, though I don't know why." Taken together, these songs prove that an artist alert to the possibilities of irony and comedy is at work on *Christine*. The premise of an evil car may be pure B-movie, but Carpenter gives the less-than-satisfactory material his all through choice of music, thematic metaphor, and his direction of the performances.

Cujo

★★★★

Critical Reception

"King's attempt to portray the dog as a projection of our darker fears isn't especially apt since the dog itself is a victim, but the film is suspenseful and genuinely terrifying."—Gene Wright, *Horrorshows: The A-To-Z of Horror in Film, TV, Radio and Theater*, A Facts on File Publications, 1986, page 8.

"[A]nother morally ambivalent movie in which the perversion of nature—i.e., the infection of the dog by a rabid bat—is juxtaposed with the depravity of man—the infidelity of a young wife and mother ... There's not much else in the movie, storywise, just the depressing sight of Cujo going to pot and the scenes of infidelity..."—Joe Baltake, "Cujo Story Isn't Dog's Best Friend," *Philadelphia Daily News*, August 18, 1983, page 35.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dee Wallace (Donna Trenton); Daniel Hugh-Kelly (Mr. Trenton); Christopher Stone (Steve Kemp); Ed Lauter (Joe Camber); Kaiulani Lee (Charity Camber); Mills Watson (Gary); Danny Pintauro (Tad Trenton); Sandy Ward (Bannerman); Jerry Hardin (Masen); Merritt Olsen (Professor); Arthur Rosenberg (Roger Breakstone); Terry Donovan-Smith (Harry); Robert Elross (Meara); Robert Behlin (Fournier); Claire Nono (Lady Reporter); Daniel H. Blatt (Dr. Markatz).

CREW: The Taft Entertainment Company Presents a Daniel H. Blatt/Robert Singer Production. *Music:* Charles Bernstein. *Casting:* Judith Holstra, Marcia S. Ross. *Film Editor:* Neil Travis. *Production Design:* Guy Camtois. *Director of Photography:* Jan De Bont. *Associate Producer:* Nail A. Machlis. *Based on the novel by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay:* Don Carlos Dunaway, Lauren Currier. *Produced by:* Daniel H. Blatt, Robert Singer. *Animation Action by:* Karl Lewis Miller. *Special Visual Effects Makeup:* Peter Knowlton. *Stunt Coordinator:* Conrad Palmisano. *Directed by:* Lewis Teague. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Trentons seem to be a perfect middle class family, but beneath the veneer of happiness are hidden secrets. Donna (Wallace) is having an affair with the town stud, Kemp (Stone), and the Trenton child, Tad (Pintauro), has a fear of monsters in his closet. Donna and Tad travel to the Camber farm to drop off their cars to be repaired. Unbeknownst to them, the Camber dog, a St. Bernard named Cujo, has been bitten by a bat and has become rabid. He's murdered Mr. Camber (Lauter) and is now insane with rage.

Donna and Tad, repeatedly assaulted by the slobbering murderous dog, are forced to retreat to their car, where they are trapped for days. When even the police aren't able to help, Donna decides it is time to take matters into her own hands. She eyes up a baseball bat in the yard, but unaware that Cujo is carefully watching her every move.

COMMENTARY: Crafting an intelligent, suspenseful and effective horror movie involves a peculiar alchemy. There must be just enough characterization to forge interesting and dynamic characters, but not so much that the characters slow down the action or pace. There must be a feeling of anticipation and suspense built into the scenario, or the film meanders. A good horror movie should also include a final confrontation that accelerates the adrenaline and provokes gasps of disbelief and terror. If possible, the horror film should also reflect some deep fear of mankind.

All these elements mixed together in the right proportions can make

for a dynamically scary movie, and yet it's not so easy to get the right quantities of each ingredient. One Stephen King adaptation that understands the equation and gets the balance exactly right is Lewis Teague's *Cujo*, a primitive club of a film that practically browbeats the terrified viewer into submission. A simple story about a rabid dog attacking a woman and her little son, this is one frightening movie. In its best and most harrowing moments, *Cujo* is simple and spare, suspenseful and shocking.

"There's no such things as real monsters," the little Trenton boy (Danny Pintauro) is told early in *Cujo*, but who can blame the boy for being scared anyway? His personal world is tumbling down and he knows it, even if he doesn't understand why. His dad (Hugh-Kelly) is consumed by work, his mother (Wallace) is bored out of her mind and engaging in an extra-marital affair, and so little Tad detects "monsters in the closet," threatening everything.

Teague expresses this fear of something in the closet with expressive camerawork. During his nighttime ritual, Tad runs to his bed in slow motion, and the path to that safe haven is elongated, prolonging his terror and sense of vulnerability.

Cujo features an unlikely and rather sad villain: a St. Bernard bitten on the nose by a bat carrying rabies. In an early scene, Cujo—who has been merrily chasing a rabbit—blindly sticks his nose into a bat's nest and one of the creatures flies at him and—in nauseating close-up—strikes. This scene captures the idea that nature is changeable and fickle. First Cujo is the hunter, but before he knows it, the tables have turned and he's the prey.



A happy view of the Trenton family. In the driver's seat is Daniel Hugh-Kelly. Riding shotgun is Dee Wallace. In the back seat is little Danny Pintauro.

This is a notion the film explores in depth. Mired in her personal woes, Donna (Wallace) heads up to the Camber place to have her car repaired, expecting a routine day. She's at the top of the food chain, after all, living in a safe modern society with infrastructure like law enforcement and hospitals. The last thing she expects is for this order to be upturned. The "superior" human being is stalked and hunted by a murderous pet. As if reflecting the unrest and turmoil in Tad's world, Cujo is rabid and crazed, determined to kill.

Teague erects a case of double discomfort in the film because his double suspense structure finds Cujo becoming a ticking time bomb and Donna's affair about to be discovered. The audience doesn't know where the shit is going to hit the fan first.

The scariest portion is a sustained assault on Tad and Donna in their parked car outside the Camber farm. Tad's fears have been made manifest in Cujo, a monster explicitly compared with the Wolf Man and other screen legends, heard howling off-screen at first in a misty landscape of jagged trees, dense fog and discomforting sounds. Cujo's

strikes are violent and convincing, sudden and highly realistic, and Teague adopts tight framing whenever he can so the dog literally pops into view. At one point the camera spins around the car and the movement is punctuated by the dog leaping into the window, a powerful jolt moment.

All bets are off once Cujo's attacks begin. The dog repeatedly rams the car door, splattering its own blood during one thrust. Part of the reason the scene is scary is because the dog itself is an icky fluid factory: wet, slobbering and bleeding. To mirror that wet look, Donna and Tad, trapped inside an automobile on a sweltering day, also sweat profusely, a reflection of Cujo's physical condition. A slow and highly angled pull-back (probably using a dolly) reveals the terrain of the battlefield. The car is isolated, alone on the idyllic landscape, and just beyond, but wholly inescapable, rests Cujo. He's waiting and rabid.



Mrs. Trenton (Wallace) shouts for help while a rabid dog attacks.

Again and again, Cujo the dog (and *Cujo* the movie) hit like a hammer. Dee Wallace is amazing in this movie, going through a series of traumatic emotions without the benefit of much dialogue. Everything is told in Donna's expressions, and this heroine must prove survivor and protector. Interestingly, because of the extra-marital affair, the audience doesn't quite trust her. We doubt that she'll cut it, and wonder, at first, about her commitment to her son.

Pintauro's performance is also terrific. His fear is tangible and as his hysteria grows, Teague's roving camera circles the car ever faster, which is the perfect visual metaphor for entrapment.

In some senses, Teague had to craft a silent movie, because so much of the film's final portion involves visualization, and the transmission of information without benefit of words. I really like how *Cujo* suggests (through editing, particularly) Donna's thought patterns. There's a shot of a baseball bat at a point early during the siege, and we know what she's thinking. There's a close-up of a door, and as Donna considers it, the camera reveals it to the audience, as though weighing factors like distance, velocity and luck. *Cujo* visually shares Donna's thoughts, and they eventually become actions, but we are never less than clear on her plan.

Cujo is a horror film that pulls no punches whatsoever. The final battle finds vulnerable mother going toe-to-paw with a huge dog, her only weapon a baseball bat. Dad arrives too late to help, impotent (but then we already knew he was a cuckold), and so this emerges as another 1980s films about motherhood resurgent, a theme also found in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Aliens* (1986).

Lewis Teague's *Alligator* (1980) is charming and fun, and his *Cat's Eye* (1985) a lark, but *Cujo* is mean and serious business. Stephen King has gone on record with his approval of *Cujo*, and it's easy to detect why. Unlike so many King adaptations, this rabid, go-for-broke horror movie is no ... dog.

CLOSE-UP: Best in Show: “The reason I said ‘yes’ to *Alligator* was that I’d always found the myth that there are alligators in the sewers of New York amusing, so I wanted to make an amusing film,” says director Lewis Teague. “I tried to create a few scary moments, but it was primarily intended to be amusing. *Cujo*, on the other hand, is based on a Stephen King novel which is about serious stuff. There’s no humor in it, so there was no effort to make it humorous.

“The material was interesting, and the chemistry in all the parts melded together very well. I was also attracted to the subject matter. Now, by that I don’t mean I’m attracted to the idea of rabid dogs. But what the story is really about—as far as I’m concerned—is fear in its many aspects. The rabid dog is just a metaphor for the fear that pervades our lives and provides a corrosive effect, especially when it’s imaginary.

“The story is of a man in advertising who loses his biggest account

after moving into the suburbs, and goes through a period of extreme financial fear and insecurity. His wife, Dee Wallace—who went along with the move for the sake of the child—is bored shitless living in the suburbs and is terrified of growing old and useless, so she has an affair with the local tennis buff. The child feels the fear and stress and tension in the atmosphere of the family, and starts imagining that monsters are in his closet.

“So *Cujo* is about the corrosive effect of fear—especially imaginary fear—and by that I mean anything which one is afraid of which isn’t actually happening at the moment,” Teague clarifies. “I thought it was a really worthy topic, and Stephen King is brilliant at creating real human beings with real problems to illustrate his stories.

“I put a lot of effort into making *Cujo* scary,” he notes. “That started when I was preparing *Alligator*. I had *Jaws* in mind when I was doing that. Before I started that film, I wanted to have a few scenes that would make people jump, so I thought about films I’d seen in my lifetime that scared me. And I focused on a few that had particularly frightening scenes that made me jump. The scene in *Jaws* I selected is where Richard Dreyfuss is swimming underwater at night, discovers a hole in the bottom of a boat, and a head falls into view. Another scene I focused on was in *Wait Until Dark*, featuring Audrey Hepburn and Alan Arkin, when he jumps out of a doorway and tackles her. That always makes the audiences scream.

“I studied those scenes to find out what they had in common, to extract a set of principles I could utilize to make a scary scene, and I took those principles and applied them to *Alligator*. I had partial success. I say partial, because they weren’t really all that scary, and they didn’t work all that well. But I wound up calling Universal Studios and talking to Verna Fields, who had edited *Jaws*, and we had a long talk about why the scenes I had done might not have worked as well as they could have.

“So when I did *Cujo*, I saw *Cujo* as an opportunity to redress the mistakes I’d made on *Alligator*, and I was able to create some scenes in *Cujo* that made the audience scream. I built on my failures in *Alligator* to create the scariest scenes in *Cujo*.

“It took a lot of planning,” Teague explains, referring to shooting a film that involved, primarily, a dog attack on a single location, in this case, a car. “It took a lot of research, initially, to come up with the principles and techniques to create scary scenes, and a lot of planning to make sure all the elements were in place. There were eleven dogs

involved in that shooting. Each dog had a special skill. If I had a scene where a dog jumped, a dog would have to be trained to that.

"We had eleven dogs. We had a mechanical dog head. We had a man in a dog suit. We had a labrador retriever in a St. Bernard suit," the director enumerates with a sense of pride. "Every scene was a complicated montage of shots that used different techniques. One shot in a sequence might utilize the man in the dog suit, and another in the sequence might use a live dog, and the next shot might use the mechanical dog head. All that had to be planned in advance, organized and scheduled."

Teague has high words of praise for his cast. "They were troupers, because during the time we shot that sequence of the car trapped in the barnyard, it rained for about three weeks straight. As you know, that sequence is supposed to take place in the scalding sunlight. There was a lot of waiting between raindrops to shoot that scene.

"It was cold. It was in the forties. Dee and Danny Pintauro were literally freezing their butts off. It was extremely difficult and harrowing, but everyone involved was first rate. I had good actors, a terrific cinematographer, Jan De Bont, good production design and a great producer.

"I felt that *Cujo* worked...."

Curtains

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Vernon (Jonathan Stryker); Linda Thorson (Brooke Parsons); Samantha Eggar (Samantha Sherwood); Anne Ditchburn (Laurian Summers); Lynne Griffin (Patti O'Connor); Sandra Warren (Lara Demilla); Lesleh Donaldson (Christie Burns); Deborah Burgess (Amanda Reuther); Michael Wincott (Matthews); Maury Chaykin (Monty); Booth Savage (Amanda's Boyfriend); Joanne McIntyre (Secretary); Calvin Butler (Dr. Pendleton); Kate Lynch (Receptionist); Janelle Hutchison (Stroker); Virginia Laight (Screamer); Ray Griff (Theiff); Bunty Webb (Tickler); Daisy White (Roommate).

CREW: Jensen Farley Pictures presents *Curtains*. *Film Editor:* Michael MacLaverty. *Production Design:* Roy Forge Smith. *Music:* Paul Zaza. *Director of Photography:* Robert Paynter. *Additional Photography:* Fred

Guthe. *Production Manager*: Gerry Arberd. *Screenplay*: Robert Guza, Jr. *Executive Producer*: Richard Simpson. *Producer*: Peter R. Simpson. *Directed by*: Jonathan Stryker. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’d kill for the part.”—An actress demonstrates her level of commitment to winning an upcoming movie role in *Curtains*.

SYNOPSIS: An actress named Samantha Sherwood (Eggar) hopes to play a madwoman in director Jonathan Stryker’s (Vernon) new production, *Audra*. However, he doesn’t believe the thespian has the requisite chops, so she commits herself to a mental hospital as research for the role ... and Stryker leaves her there.

Sometime later, Stryker invites six beautiful (and nubile) actresses to his remote, wintry estate to audition for the still-available part of the madwoman. One of the aspiring ingénues (Burgess) is killed before she ever reaches the house. The other five are a past-her-prime star, Brooke Parsons (Thorson); a stand-up comedienne, Patti O’Connor (Griffin); a champion ice-skater, Christie Burns (Donaldson); and two others, Lara and Laurian. Sherwood also manages to break out of the sanitarium and attend the weekend-long casting call, much to Stryker’s surprise and chagrin.

Before long, however, a killer wearing an old hag’s mask begins to dispatch the young actresses in a variety of terrible ways. While practicing her skating, for instance, Christie is decapitated with a sickle. Stryker is slow to believe that a killer may be among them, but the murders continue with alarming regularity. After Stryker sleeps with hottie Brooke, Samantha snaps and murders them both with a handgun. But Samantha discovers, to her dismay, that she isn’t the only murderer on the premises who would “kill” for a part.

COMMENTARY: The cutthroat world of acting is the organizing principle for the accomplished and fascinating slasher film, *Curtains*. This *leitmotif* provides the movie a title (“curtains” indicates the end of a show, when they fall over the stage) as well as the victim pool, which includes an unfaithful director and a slew of competitive ingénues who hope to make it big in Hollywood. The world of actors also provides the location for the film, a two-day casting retreat in an isolated house, Restview Manor.

Red herrings aplenty appear, and the film ends with the novel twist that there are two killers in residence—each acting independently. One of the killers, Samantha Sherwood, has very good reason to be

angry, because of the director's leaving her locked up in the asylum.

Dwelling in the world of *Variety*, publicity shows, auditions, opening acts, acting exercises and the like, *Curtains'* form nicely echoes its content. The film begins with a monologue about madness (a recurrent theme in the film), and then features an old-style theatrical movie transition, the iris in-iris out. This is how *Curtains* sees its world: as one big production. In fact, more aptly, the movie sees itself as a lengthy audition. By the climax, Samantha has been driven mad by the events at the retreat and the actress—whom we saw delivering the monologue at the beginning and failing to convey madness—is at long last ready to play the part of a lifetime. She's lived the role of Audra (literally) and is now truly and irrevocably mad. Talk about your method actors.

The killer wears the very frightening mask (replete with fright wig!) of an old hag. Even this choice of uniform reflects the organizing principle (the competitive acting world) because Hollywood movies are obsessed with youth. Women who grow too old (say, like forty) are tossed aside in favor of young starlets. The old hag mask shows up in a rehearsal as Stryker asks his would-be cast to make themselves "ugly" for him. The slasher's mask in the film is an outer representation of the actor's fear that he or she will grow old and therefore not only become undesirable, but unemployable.

All the situational clichés of the slasher paradigm appear in *Curtains*, including the dark and stormy night, the gratuitous nudity and the stay-aware from a terrible nightmare. Despite the familiarity of such chestnuts, the murder scenes are staged with ingenuity. The most famous of these occurs on a frozen lake, as the killer pursues an ingénue who has slept with Stryker, the professional skater, Christie. Tight framing accentuates this scene, and the movie makes interesting use of slow-motion photography and silence on the soundtrack. This scene is strangely beautiful, almost surreal, as the outdoor setting is contrasted with the slow-motion approach of a creepy killer wielding a bizarre weapon, a sickle.

Since *Curtains* also makes witty use of theatrical props and sets, and boasts funny, relevant dialogue (like the plea from one actress to another, "Spare me the melodrama"). *Curtains* holds together better than many of its slasher brethren. It's a relief to be outside the world of camp counselors and teenagers for a change, and because all the characters are drama queens—literally—the *dramatis personae* are more interesting. "An actress must always be in control," one of them says, and that means—to *Curtains'* benefit—any one of them could be

a liar or a killer. Or any two of them, for that matter.

The Dead Zone

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“[A] dark and chilling portrayal of a man beset by his own personal devils, exorcised finally through self-sacrifice. In spite of its preoccupation with death and dying, there is little gratuitous gore, just competent, understated acting and directing. Well worth a second look.”—Douglas Menville and R. Reginald, *Futurevisions: The New Golden Age of the Science Fiction Film*, A Greenbriar Book, 1985, page 150.

“The missiles are flying. Hallelujah!” Martin Sheen is scary as hell in this flick—I felt that way when I first saw the film as a teenager, but he’s even more chilling now that we have the comparison of his fantasy-perfect president of *The West Wing*. It’s the flawlessly modulated performances that go a long way to making this one of the best adaptations of a Stephen King novel: Neither Sheen nor Christopher Walken give in to the urge to ham it up ... but then again, neither of them are the kind to ham it up. I think Generation X’s Cult of Christopher Walken—of which I am a devout member—may have begun with this flick. His deadpan mien in the face of the outrageous and the implausible, both on the part of the character he’s playing and the actor portraying that character, mirrors our own insouciance. There’s an unlikely but profound simpatico between this performer of our parents’ generation and ourselves.”—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher* (www.flickfilosopher.com)

“A sad, but ultimately uplifting movie about an unlikely hero. With great power comes great responsibility, and it’s even worse when you lose your girlfriend while in a coma. Walken and Sheen alone are worth the price of admission, and when you add in a classic story, the only thing that [could] go wrong is burnt popcorn.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Walken (Johnny Smith); Brooke Adams (Sarah Bracknell); Tom Skerritt (Sheriff Bannerman); Herbert Lom (Dr. Sam Weizak); Anthony Zerbe (Roger Stuart); Colleen Dewhurst (Henrietta Dodd); Nicholas Campbell (Frank Dodd); Martin Sheen (Greg Stillson);

Sean Sullivan (Herb Smith); Jackie Burroughs (Vera Smith); Geza Kovacs (Sonny); Roberta Weiss (Alma Frechette); Simon Craig (Christ Stuart); Peter Dvorsky (Dardis); Julie Ann Heathwood (Amy); Barry Flatman (Walt); Raffi Tchalikian (Denny #1); Ken Pogue (Vice President); Gordon Jocelyn (Five Star General); Bill Copeland (Secretary of State); Jack Messinger (Therapist); Chappelle Jaffe (Nurse); Cindy Hines (Natalie); Helen Udy (Weizak's Mother); Ramon Estevez (Teenage Boy with Camera).

CREW: Dino De Laurentiis Presents a David Cronenberg Film. *Casting:* Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirschenson, Dierdre Bowen. *Music Composed and Arranged by:* Michael Kamen. *Costume Designer:* Olga Dimitrov. *Associate Producer:* Jeffrey Chernov. *Film Editor:* Ronald Sanders. *Production Designer:* Carol Spier. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Based on the novel by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* Jeffrey Boam. *Produced by:* Debra Hill. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Jon Belyeu. *Stunt Coordinators:* Dick Warlock, Carey Loftin. *Video Electronic Effects:* Michael Lennick. *Biomedical Advisor:* Jeremy F. Keable. *Directed by:* David Cronenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

INCANTATION: "You are either in possession of a very new human ability, or a very old one."—Dr. Sam Weizak (Herbert Lom) discusses Johnny Smith's (Christopher Walken) newfound power of insight, in David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*.

SYNOPSIS: Schoolteacher Johnny Smith (Walken) is in a terrible car accident after a day at the amusement park with his girlfriend Sarah (Adams). He awakens from coma some five years later, at the Weizak clinic.

Smith soon discovers that he now has the ability to read the future of any person he touches. He saves a nurse's daughter from a house fire by warning her of it as it happens, and reveals to Dr. Weizak (Lom) that his mother—long thought dead in the Holocaust—is actually still alive.

Despite this gift of insight, Johnny is shattered to learn that Sarah has married and now has a ten-month-old child. His mind is taken off this personal pain when Castle Rock's Sheriff Bannerman (Skerritt) recruits him to help him locate a local lunatic who has been murdering women by cutting them up with scissors.

Johnny succeeds, unveiling Bannerman's deputy Dodd (Campbell) as the killer, but is wounded by Dodd's mother during the attempted arrest. Some time later, Smith becomes a tutor and is able to save the

life of a young boy whom he envisions dying while playing on an ice-covered lake. Finally, Smith comes to see the purpose of his abilities when he shakes the hand of a charismatic Senate candidate, Greg Stillson (Sheen). Johnny experiences a terrifying vision of Stillson as president, initiating a full-scale nuclear war, and realizes that knowing the future is no longer enough. Now he must act to change the future, even if it means his life.

COMMENTARY: A feeling of doom, sadness and isolation hangs over David Cronenberg's adaptation of the Stephen King novel, *The Dead Zone*. On first glance, the film feels episodic and choppy, but on closer study, it is revealed as an intimate study of a man longing for human connection and purpose, and finally, in the act of self-sacrifice, finding it. The episodes in the film are steps along the way to Johnny Smith's final journey, and necessary to his overall "arc," which finds him playing the public role of presidential assassin.

Early in *The Dead Zone*, Johnny Smith loses his whole life in one horrible instant. A road accident lands him in a five-year coma, and when he emerges from this lengthy slumber, his girlfriend, Sarah (Brooke Adams), has moved on and married another man. Even though Johnny admonished Sarah before the accident that "some things are worth waiting for," she apparently didn't get the point.

When Johnny awakes, he finds himself totally disconnected from the personal and professional life (as a teacher) he once coveted. Instead, he's connected to something scary, either a gift or a curse, depending on perspective. As he struggles to touch another human life, he finds that his touch literally creates a psychic connection between people. He has the power of psychometry, to touch a person and see (in startling visions) their future.

Throughout the film, Johnny alternates between wanting to use the "gift" of psychic insight and simply desiring his old life back. The people around him prove suspicious of his abilities and so Johnny is now always separated, alone. Cronenberg stages several scenes of Walken standing behind window panes or car windows gazing out on the world, highlighting the barrier between Johnny and society at large. The film also notes with irony that Johnny can touch a person and know everything about them, but what he wants is to be touched and known; to be loved and cherished as he was before that terrible accident and coma.

"Why did it have to be this way?" Johnny wonders. Though that's a question his kindly doctor can't answer, Johnny attempts to see work

as his way of re-connecting with people. In a series of vignettes, he utilizes his psychic insight to assist those in need. In the first vignette, Johnny assists a couple of cops catch a serial killer; it ends badly when Johnny witnesses a suicide. Gruesomely, the scene involves a police deputy impaling himself on a pair of open scissors.

In the next episode, a scarred Johnny has moved on to another town. His headaches are now coming three or four times a day and his body is weakening. Worse, he's somewhat infamous because of his work on the police case and gets tons of mail asking for help. At this point, Johnny attempts to deny his abilities and goes to work as a private tutor. But, a disturbing vision of a child's drowning again hampers his ability to connect to those around him.

Finally, in *The Dead Zone*'s finest section, Johnny shakes hands with candidate Greg Stillson (Martin Sheen), a Southern populist running for president. Stillson claims he had "a vision" that he will be president, but Johnny does the politician one better and experiences a phantasm of the psychotic Stillson raining down apocalypse upon the world. In a vision harking back to the great fear of the 1980s (a nuclear exchange between the super powers), Stillson informs his advisors he has pressed the button. "The missiles are flying. Hallelujah!"

It's at this juncture that Johnny asks a classic science fiction question. Can he change the future, or only remotely view it? A "dead zone" in his visions suggests he can alter what is to be, and so—acting the role of a crazed gunman—Johnny attempts to assassinate Stillson. He's a failure in this regard, but still exposes Stillson as a coward, and that's enough to alter the future. Johnny dies experiencing one last vision: It reveals a *Newsweek* headline blaring "No Future For Stillson!" When Johnny dies he has not only touched the world, he has saved it from annihilation. What turned out to be important was not his connection to one person, Sarah (who will never understand his actions), but rather his connection to all mankind.

The Dead Zone is a rich, touching movie about a tragic, misunderstood figure. Unlike many Stephen King adaptations, there is nothing cartoonish about the characters or situations, and unlike many David Cronenberg films, the narrative flow is never breached by strange, incomprehensible blind alleys. Walken is a wonder in the film, and competes with *The Stuff*'s Michael Moriarity for quirkiest performance of the decade. One of the finest elements of *The Dead Zone* is Cronenberg's staging of the future visions, in which Johnny himself becomes a participant. When the visions begin (always with a start),

he's suddenly moved from our world into the "future" world. This placement of the lead within the psychic phantasms (and therefore exposed to fire and the like) means that Johnny's experiences feel dangerous, not passive.

The Dead Zone features a grand view of human ugliness and evil. An early scene deals with Nazi Germany, and the serial killer sequences looks at desperate, twisted psychology. Finally, the Stillson interlude looks again at man's capacity for self-destruction and delusion. In all these situations, Johnny Smith is also Johnny on the spot. The man who can help. Even if what he really wants is just to be loved.

LEGACY: Perhaps with an eye towards the episodic structure of *The Dead Zone*, the USA Channel in 2002 began airing a TV series based on Stephen King's book, featuring the ongoing adventures of psychic Johnny Smith (now played by Anthony Michael Hall).

The Entity



Critical Reception

"Unpleasant nonsense, way overlong, but with the occasional well-staged scene for those who can stay the course."—Leslie Halliwell, *Halliwell's Film Guide, Seventh Edition*, Harper and Row, 1991, page 318.

"This is a very disturbing movie, which of course means it's great. Combines the horror of sexual assault with the unexplained motives of the supernatural force that delivers it, the movie is doubly chilling because of its unresolved ending."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Barbara Hershey (Carla Moran), Ron Silver (Phil Sneiderman); David Labiosa (Billy); George Coe (Dr. Weber); Margaret Blye (Cindy Nash); Jacqueline Brooker (Dr. Cooley); Michael Alldredge (George Nash); Richard Brestoff (Gene Krafft); Raymond Singer (Joe Mehan); Natasha Ryan (Julie); Melanie Griffin (Kim); Allan Rich (Dr. Walcott); Alex Rocco (Jerry Anderson); Sully Boyar (Mr. Reisz); Tom Stern (Woody Browne); Curt Lowens (Dr. Wilkes); Paula Victor (Dr. Chevalier).

CREW: American Cinema Productions Presents a Sidney J. Furie Film. **Casting:** Barbara S. Claman. **Music:** Charles Bernstein. **Film Editor:** Frank J. Urioste. **Production Designer:** Charles Rosen. **Director of Photography:** Stephen H. Burum. **Executive Producers:** Michael Leone, Andrew T. Pfeffer. **Visual Effects Designed by:** William Cruse. **Special Makeup Effects Created by:** Stan Winston, James Kagel. **Special Effects by:** Joe Lombardi, Special Effects Unlimited. **Based on the novel** The Entity **by:** Frank DeFelitta. **Screenplay by:** Frank DeFelitta. **Produced by:** Harold Schneider. **Directed by:** Sidney J. Furie. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 120 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Carla, you’re one of the most stable people I know. And you’re definitely not insane. But when men who aren’t actually there come into your room and have intercourse with you, it’s time to see a good psychiatrist.”—Cindy (Margaret Blye) offers advice to Carla Moran (Barbara Hershey) in *The Entity*.

SYNOPSIS: After a long day at the office and an evening of adult education classes, Carla Moran (Hershey)—working mother of a teenager named Bill (Labiosa) and two young daughters—returns home and while preparing for bed in her tiny Los Angeles house is assaulted and brutally raped by an unseen, paranormal force.

When the attacks continue with alarming frequency, Carla’s friend Cindy (Blye) advises her to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Schneiderman (Silver). He believes that Carla is working out her own internal sexual problems, not facing supernatural phenomena.

Over the months, the attacks by the ghost escalate, but Carla never stops fighting, especially when assisted by two parapsychology students and the prestigious Dr. Cooley (Brooker). These experts manage to photograph and otherwise quantify Carla’s malevolent ghost, though Schneiderman is still unconvinced. When Carla ends up in the hospital after a particularly rough attack, Dr. Cooley proposes a controlled experiment at the university, one that will recreate the site of the attack (Carla’s house), but also trap the spirit with liquid helium.

All goes according to plan, and the evil spirit follows Carla to the recreation of her home, but then things start to go badly wrong, and Carla is endangered again. This time, however, no one—not even the skeptical Dr. Schneiderman—will be able to deny that they’ve seen something otherworldly.

COMMENTARY: To state it in blunt terms, *The Entity* is one of the

scariest movies ever made. Based on an allegedly true story, Sidney J. Furie's film reveals the unnerving tale of Carla Moran (played by Barbara Hershey), a woman bedeviled by malevolent spirits. Unlike the spirits in *Poltergeist* (1982), which at least begin as playful, the entity in this film is vicious and cruel ... and decidedly male.

Given these circumstances, *The Entity* works on a few different levels. On one plateau, it's a horror movie about the supernatural. On another level of meaning, it concerns the way that a single woman is repeatedly dominated and abused by society, spirits and the men in her lives. Carla's a "single woman in jeopardy," a common protagonist in horror films. Her husband left her alone to take care of a grown son and her schedule is booked 24-7. She holds down a job, attends night classes after school, and comes home to take care of the kids. She lives in a small, lower middle class home and can't afford to move to a better neighborhood. Given all her responsibilities, it's no wonder that she sometimes feels anxious and "flipped out."

As *The Entity* reveals more of Carl's back story, the audience is left with the impression that she is "the perfect victim," and that this is the reason why a supernatural being has chosen to torment her. Carla was an abused child. Her father was inappropriate with her and so she ran away from home at sixteen. She then met Mario, Billy's father, and he was a drinker and drug addict. After Mario died in a motorcycle accident, she chose to be with Bob Garret, a much older lover, one who was paternal rather than passionate. Taking in all this information, it becomes clear that, as the psychiatrist (Ron Silver) notes, "Certain phases of our life never really die. Sometimes they come back with a vengeance."

In other words, perhaps Carla isn't really facing sexual attack from a supernatural force, only reliving some of the traumas in her life. Another pseudo red herring: Carla and her son Billy (who resembles his father) share a kind of unhealthy attraction to one another. *Poltergeist* infestations most often arise at puberty, during adolescence, and so the specter is raised in *The Entity* that Billy may be responsible for the rapes. That doesn't turn out to be the case, but it's another example of a dominant male figure attempting to control Carla.



Carla Moran (Barbara Hershey) faces violent nightly visitations from a strange invader in the terrifying *The Entity* (1983).

Silver portrays the film's wrong-headed and infuriating psychiatrist. Though he clearly loves Carla and is concerned for her safety, he also attempts to impose his will and world view upon her. He chooses to see her as a sick woman, rather than one afflicted by a real horror. He's another man, then, who doesn't believe her and whom she can't trust. So is her current, worthless boyfriend, who spies her nude and under assault and can't countenance the vision. Like all the men in Carla's life, Jerry leaves her to fend for herself.

The Entity ends with the supernatural attacks "decreased in both frequency and urgency" and one senses this diminished assault occurs because Carla finally stands up to the invisible aggressor—and by proxy, all the men who have harmed her.

"All right, bastard! I've finished running," she says. "I'm so tired of being scared." Carla thus takes back her life and through a kind of assertiveness training, learns not to let the entity "in," any more. In charting Carla's growth, from victim to passionate defender of her rights, *The Entity* is actually a film revolving around female empowerment, and the ways that females can fight back against domestic abusers, rapists and the like. At film's conclusion, when the entity doesn't die but occasionally returns, this fate is a reflection of

the fact that it is still a man's world. The battle for equality and respect isn't just waged against one man (or one entity), it's waged against an ingrained system of patriarchy that seeks to objectify women and make them second-class citizens, compliant victims. It's a battle, one senses, that for Carla will never end totally.

In depicting the story of a woman who lives with a supernatural abuser, *The Entity* doesn't shy from scenes of vicious rape and attack. When the ghost first arrives, it slaps Carla around, throwing her back against her bed. On the soundtrack comes the repetitive, dissonant banging of a drum, continuing like rhythmic thrusts. *Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!* And Carla is rocked back and forth as she is violated. It's disturbing and weird, and Carla is left beaten and bruised ... though she never even saw her attacker.

These attacks occur with alarming frequency and so the film makes a case about living a long time in a physically abusive situation. When Carla gazes into a mirror several times during the film, she hates what she sees. When she smashes the mirror out of frustration, it's because she can't stand to face herself any more. She feels ashamed, as though she has somehow brought this on herself. Many rape victims feel exactly the same way; that they in some fashion "initiated" the crime, or "had it coming." Indeed, many in society look at rape in just this unsympathetic fashion.

Early in the film, Carla also attempts to deny what is occurring rather than facing it, another "real life" quality. She just wants to "escape" with her boyfriend. When Jerry leaves her, that option is off the table too.

For all its ferocious, even barbarous bluntness in the attack sequences, *The Entity* is also packed with some wonderful, very realistic dialogue scenes that get to the heart of Carla's woes. She is a character the audience comes to care deeply for, and Hershey's performance gives the film the humanity it needs to sustain itself for its lengthy two-hour running time.

The Entity also feels very original because none of the supernatural events occur in a big, spooky storied mansion, as in countless other chillers. *The Entity* democratizes the haunted house to the middle class and lower middle class, and this is an efficacious venue for the subgenre. The strange location, that tiny house which appears to be crookedly situated from the street, reflects Carla's plight. I always complain (even in this book) that haunted house victims never leave when they should. Here there's actually a good reason why: There's

nowhere for Carla to go. She can't afford to move, and staying with friends—as the movie points out—isn't really an option either. Carla's on her own and must learn to cope with her situation, night terrors and all.

The Entity only truly falters in its last action, which finds the local university conducting a strange experiment to trap and contain the malevolent entity. Here, the human story finally gives way to special mechanical effects (like bursts of smoky liquid helium) and colorful explosions. These moments provide a conventional climax to a highly unconventional and stirring tale of one woman's struggle not to play the victim any more. Not even in the presence of psychological or literal ghosts.

The Evil Dead



Critical Reception

“The writer-director Samuel M. Raimi has gone so far over the top as to be out of sight. But then again, it is a movie that can be viewed as an ultimate black joke on the whole of the genre in that everything is so outrageously explicit that laughter can be the only answer to such excesses of mood and atmosphere.”—Tom Hutchinson, Roy Pickard, *Horrors: A History of Horror Movies*, Chartwell Books, Inc., 1984, page 66.

“I could write a book on what a good film this is. It looks like it cost about twelve dollars. The cinematography was some of the most exciting in *any* film of its era. The film itself was genuinely scary on first viewing, and Bruce Campbell threw himself into his role with gusto (minus the wisecracks that would make *Evil Dead 2* more fun but less frightening). Absolutely relentless in its confidence, it told its simple story with more style than any film of this type has any right to have. Raimi made an astounding debut with this film—who knew he'd go as far as he has? The music works, the acting is a little spotty in places, but it's got everything a good horror film needs. This one is as good as they come.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

“Cabin fever never spread such an infection. Besides the hackneyed use of ‘the recorded message that must not be played,’ this movie entertains on many levels. Bruce Campbell is always good for some

over-the-top fun, and the special effects don't aim unreasonably high.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Campbell (Ashley); Ellen Sandweiss (Cheryl); Hal Delrich (Scott); Betsy Baker (Linda); Sarah York (Shelly); Dorothy Tapert, Scott Spiegel, Ted Raimi, Ivan Raimi (False Shemps).

CREW: *Presented by:* Renaissance Pictures. *Executive Producers:* Robert Tapert, Bruce Campbell, Sam Raimi. *Film Editor:* Edna Ruth Paul. *Assistant Editor:* Joel Coen. *Supervising Sound Editor:* Joe Masefield. *Music:* Joe LoDuca. *Music Engineered at Audiographics by:* Ed Wolfrum. *Photography and Lighting:* Tim Philo. *Special Makeup Effects:* Tom Sullivan. *Photographic Special Effects:* Bart Pierce. *Written and Directed by:* Sam Raimi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Five young adults, Ash (Campbell), Cheryl (Sandweiss), Scotty (Delrich), Linda (Baker), and Shelly (York), vacation at a tiny cabin deep in the woods of Tennessee.

On their first night, Cheryl experiences a terrible seizure and draws an odd object: a book featuring an inhuman, monstrous visage. Later, the cellar door is opened and deep inside the basement the youngsters find that very book, as well as a shotgun, a ceremonial dagger, and a reel-to-reel tape recording. The group plays the tape and listens as an academician reports that he has unearthed a Sumerian city called Kandar and it was there that he found the Book of the Dead.

Furthermore, the professor warns that passages of the book can resurrect ancient demons if spoken aloud. He does speak the incantations aloud, awakening a terrible, malevolent force in the woods. What follows is a night of terror as each of Ash's friends, including his girl Linda, becomes possessed by monstrous, ugly demonic creatures. The only way to stop the demons is bodily dismemberment.

COMMENTARY: Sometimes, it takes the sensibilities of an outsider to see the rules of the genre best; someone who admires the form but wants to flex his film legs under his own steam, subsequently casting aside years of received wisdom and stale convention in the process. Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* is a startling debut for just this reason. The director—not yet twenty-five years old—lets his imagination loose to play, and the result is a kinetic, gonzo film, a cinematic body blow of such force that the audience is rocked back on its heels, bludgeoned and beaten down by the pure energy and ingenuity of the enterprise.

The ads described the film as “the ultimate in grueling terror” and were truthful. *The Evil Dead* is as much visceral experience as a movie to watch. It feels immediate and even painful at times. It happens to us, and there is precious little distance between percipient and the events on screen.

Plotwise, perhaps, *The Evil Dead* is nothing to write home about. It matches a *Friday the 13th*-style group of young, mildly differentiated protagonists with a notion right out of H.P. Lovecraft: the Book of the Dead (or Necronomicon Ex Mortis) reviving demons in human form; possessing people with the dark spirits of the “Old Ones” who once dominated the Earth. These teens, “away from the myriad distractions of modern civilization,” run a bloody gauntlet that requires the survivors to dismember and decapitate friends and even the fight the woods themselves. The demons strike back in force, and an invisible, unseen force roams the forest knocking down trees like King Kong.

The Evil Dead’s simple narrative also reveals more than a passing resemblance to a little-known 1971 film called *Equinox*, which saw another “adept demonologist” take a book of demon incantations to his remote cabin in the woods, where things went wrong. A similarly staged shot of a tape recorder’s “wheels” spinning appears in both films, but the similarities are surface. It isn’t what a movie is about that makes it special, it’s how it’s about it, as Roger Ebert is wont to write, and Sam Raimi invents a whole new class of ingenious shots in *The Evil Dead*, including his patented “unsteady” cam or shaky-cam.

The “road trip/vacation gone wrong” scenario that begins *The Evil Dead* is an effective horror idea because viewers understand that a trip to an unfamiliar destination takes us out of our element, and therefore a vital sense of security and safety is sacrificed. Being a stranger in a strange land renders one “alone,” removing all links to the familiar and comforting. Untethered, characters, and thus viewers, cling to the simple things. A telephone, a car that probably won’t start, even a flashlight with low batteries. These tools become lifelines, important survival implements if the fish-out-of-water characters are to survive their ordeals. *The Evil Dead* is a classic example of the scenario: a vacation in the mountains turned into a blood-curdling nightmare, thanks to some ancient Sumerian spirits. A sign with the legend TRAVEL AT OWN RISK appears early on, and this warning sets the tone.

The Evil Dead brings to mind a few other horror classics. Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* commenced with several shots of a lonely car traversing a twisted road, en route to an isolated cemetery.

Romero's camera tracked the car's trajectory; the winding road, leading into a rural locale, seemed ominous and foreboding. Here, Ash drives four friends up the winding roads of the mountains, unaware that all around them a "dark" force has gathered. The winding road, the late 1960s-early 1970s model car, and the isolated, rural location all play into a feel reminiscent of *Living Dead*.

Then seconds later, there's a close encounter with an oncoming truck nicknamed "Lazy Mary," harking back to the Mack truck incident in the climax of Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with a similarly christened "Black Maria." Yet if these narrative locales and elements play as tribute to the great horrors of earlier vintage, the opening scene also reveals Raimi's unique visual genius and ability to leap beyond convention.

From the get-go, Raimi stacks events atop one another, front-loading the suspense. Conventional film wisdom advises the intrepid student that cross-cutting is an effective tool to generate tension, but also, importantly, that cross-cutting between more than two opposing forces will confuse audiences. Raimi hasn't even reached the five minute point in his first feature film before shattering that convention. During the opening sequence, he crosscuts between *three* elements: the approaching truck, the demon "Force" point of view subjective shot, and the car carrying the kids to the cabin. Significantly, this happens before the characters are formally introduced, or even particularly recognizable.

The inclusion of a third perspective in the opening scene sets the film on its metaphorical edge, generating the feeling that something is amiss, off-kilter. The film's visuals thus reflects content: that a deadly power is loose and influencing events, nearly killing Ash and friends when it assumes control of the car and almost causes a collision.

Much of *Evil Dead*'s value as a horror film arises from its surprising, unpredictable nature, particularly the manner in which it reveals information to the audience. The movie may not be surprising narratively—let's face it, everybody understands something bad is going to happen to these kids. But within those "predictable" confines of horror storytelling, Raimi lets loose and deploys the camera to express terror in revolutionary ways.

This "unsettling" feeling is generated in even the smallest of details. As the Delta Oldsmobile first approaches the secluded cabin, a heartbeat sound effect reverberates on the soundtrack. It is revealed not to be a heartbeat at all, but rather a hanging porch swing banging

against the front wall of the cabin. But just when the film has lulled the audience into a kind of trance with this metronome-like, repetitive banging sound, it abruptly stops. The swing comes ominously to a standstill for no reason. Again, this unusual moment fosters the notion of something off, something uprooting expectations, perhaps even a master manipulator behind the scenes, whether it be the dark force in the woods according to the script, or the mind of Raimi, who helms the picture.

Almost immediately, there is another little surprise. Scotty (Hal Delrich) enters the cabin and there is mist *inside* it, not outside. Later, protagonists Linda, Cheryl, Shelly and Scotty surprise us again by becoming antagonists. It is unsettling to cross these traditional lines of character “orientation,” and not something done lightly.

In any discussion of specific *Evil Dead* scenes, Cheryl’s rape by the woods is certain to be addressed. It’s *Evil Dead*’s most controversial sequence, and remains a mesmeric, trademark moment, because, in the words of author Jake Horsely, the sequence has “the all-redeeming virtue of being genuinely imaginative, a borderline artistic-mythic concept. Those pagan roots have emerged again and dragged the maiden, like Persephone into Hades, back to the jungle.”¹⁸

Some see this scene as misogynist, but what *The Evil Dead* truly depicts, at least if there is a subtext to be interpreted here, is something akin to a personal apocalypse, a personal hell for the weak-willed and sensitive Ashley. Before fans get upset over this unflattering description of their heroic icon, they should recall that this was before Campbell was Ash, the sarcastic wisecracker of *Evil Dead 2* and *Army of Darkness*. Here he is just a stumbling, bumbling average guy, Ashley. He finds himself bullied and cajoled by the sarcastic Scotty, henpecked by his bothersome sister Cheryl, and consumed, one might even say “whipped,” by his love for beautiful Linda.

Within that context of a personal apocalypse, a nightmare in which ally turns into nemesis, *Evil Dead* also strives for and attains a genuine Gothic texture. The film has been credited with the resurrection of the Lovecraftian cycle in film, thus inspiring films such as *Re-Animator* (1985) and *From Beyond* (1986). More to the point, it adopts core Gothic conceits. Stoker’s Dracula was a Gothic protagonist, simultaneously frightening and alluring. Consider the Deadites of *Evil Dead*: They are two-faced creations as well, beautiful and inviting one moment, horrible and evil the next. This facet of the film’s tapestry is especially pronounced when Ash carries out his beloved Linda to bury

her. She is garbed in a flowing white nightgown, the preferred garb of the Gothic heroine, and the general setting, another tenet of the literature, is a remote one, amongst nature.

It is that Gothic yin and yang, that Linda can function as both object of desire *and* object of terror, that informs the scene of her resurrection. Visually, Raimi does something interesting and totally disgusting with this sequence: He makes her murder an example, like the rape in the woods, of something akin to sexual climax. Consider the events of the scene: Ash decapitates Linda with a shovel. Her headless corpse lands on his prone form, essentially mounting him, and what happens? Tons of deep black goop, blood perhaps, ejaculate into his face.

Further deepening the sexual metaphor, Raimi cuts to a shot of Linda's bare legs straddling and crawling excitedly over Ash's lower body. On the soundtrack she moans with pleasure, even though her head is missing.

This is a beautifully orchestrated yet sickening perversion of sexual intercourse, an orgasmic gratification achieved through death and dismemberment. And, making it socially valuable, it is perfectly in keeping with a long-standing Gothic tradition of attraction/repulsion finding embodiment inside one character. Like the other Deadites, Linda is both beauty and beast, attractive and repellent, a modern-day Rappaccini's Daughter. To love her is to die, to love death itself.

However, the factor making *The Evil Dead* an effective horror film of the highest caliber is not this undercurrent of Gothic idealism.

No, *The Evil Dead* remains potent because of Raimi's aggressive, even invasive camerawork. Specifically, he rams the characters' discomfort right down the viewers' throats. We are carried on the wings of an invisible demon and spared no detail of the violence and terror. We are passengers trapped aboard a kamikaze jet, propelled without control into terror, always racing towards death and violence.

Raimi's extensive use of close-ups mirrors this "ambush" style of formalist filmmaking. Again, the standard rule posits that in comedies, directors should not deploy close-ups because this particular shot heightens audience identification with a character's pain. If Charlie Chaplin falls on a banana peel and the camera stands back at some distance, the pratfall is funny, not sad or disturbing, because we aren't close enough to feel his pain.

Notice that the last section of *Evil Dead*, during the horrific meltdown, is absolutely packed with close-ups of Bruce Campbell experiencing nothing less than mind-blowing fear and anguish. Again, the audience is there, in his face, every time a new chunk of flesh or a putrid dollop of bile slams into it. The impact of such close shots is one of heightened identification. The audience is spared no impact, wet or otherwise.

Cockeyed angles, expressing how the world has gone off-kilter since the ascent of the Deadites, are also effectively used during Ash's return from the cellar following the blood flood. And consider too the efficacy of intense quick-cutting in the film's final confrontation, as Scotty pulls on Ash's leg and Ash desperately reaches forward to hook the Book of the Dead with Linda's necklace. As in *Psycho*, the effect of the machine-gun-style, staccato editing is an almost unconscious heightening of the adrenaline. The audience cannot help but feel involved.

Raw, crude, and powerful, *The Evil Dead* represents filmmaking on an emotional, basic, and almost primeval level. Frankly, there is no better way to approach this particular genre. Raimi and his cohorts have succeeded brilliantly in applying the right techniques—and imagining new ones—to augment the tale of five kids under siege by horrible monsters. Underneath that level, there is an application of the Gothic ethos and some kind of paranoid statement about personal betrayal, but none of that is as important as how the movie depicts its scares.

Viewing *The Evil Dead* is never a passive or intellectual experience. By understanding film grammar and then rewriting it, Raimi has directed a film that works powerfully on the gut. Since “fear” is a sort of irrational, hard-to-categorize feeling anyway, this approach works just fine. Most of all, the rejuvenating *The Evil Dead* demonstrates how immediate and affecting a good example of the genre can really be.

The Final Terror

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Friedrich (Zorich); Adrian Zmed (Marco); Daryl Hannah (Wendy); Mark Metcalf (Mike); Ernest Haden, Jr. (Hines); Rachel Ward (Margaret); Akosua Busia (Vanessa); Lewis Smith (Boone); Cindy Harrell (Melanie); Joe Pantoliano (Eggars); Irene Sanders (Sannine);

Richard Jacobs (Mr. Morgan); Donna Pinder (Mrs. Morgan); Jim Youngs (Jim); Tonny Maccario (Egger's Mother).

CREW: Samuel Z. Arkoff presents a Joe Roth film. *Music*: Susan Justin. *Executive in Charge of Production*: Allan Holzman. *Casting*: Penny Perry, Penny Ellers. *Film Editors*: Paul Rubell, Erica Flaum. *Co-produced by*: J. Stein Kaplan. *Director of Photography*: Andreas Davidescu. *Screenplay by*: Jon George, Neill Hicks, Ronald Shusett. *Story by*: Jon George, Neill Hicks. *Produced by*: Joe Roth. *Special Effects Makeup*: Ken Myers. *Stunts*: Jeannie Epper. *Directed by*: Andrew Davis. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of rowdy young forestry workers and their girlfriends take a bus deep into the forest and plan to hike towards a river where they will pick up some boats and do some canoeing. There is a mental institute near the forest, and recently a couple was murdered in these very woods, but the vacationers don't let any of this stop their plans for some fun. The bus driver, an unpopular geek named Eggars (Pantoliano), warns the campers not to stray into the woods. One of the campers tells the story of a wild woman who escaped from the mental institute after being raped and had a baby, and now zealously guards the woods from intruders. Before long, the campers know these stories are true as they are hunted by a ferocious killer who takes out the leader of the group, Mike (Metcalf), and kidnaps his girl, Melanie (Harrell). The desperate campers try to make for the river and the canoes, but as they are picked off one at a time realize that they must stand and fight the terror in the woods.

COMMENTARY: *Deliverance* (1972) meets *Friday the 13th* (1980) in this effective “madman in the woods” modification of the slasher paradigm. *The Final Terror* succeeds where many other films like this fail because its characters are neither excessively stupid nor contemptible, and the movie neatly expresses the notion of just how isolated the victims are out there, in that grand, gorgeous—and dangerous—forest.

Ever since Jean Renoir’s *A Day in the Country* (1936), cinema has played with the notion of nature as a foreign place, one where inhibitions are released and city folk find themselves at the mercy of emotional storms and other forces they don’t understand. *The Final Terror* is no Renoir movie, yet (much like 1977’s *The Hills Have Eyes* and, to a much lesser degree, 1984’s *The Prey*), it explores the idea that the wilderness is just that.

In the 1980s, Americans had more creature comforts, including Atari

2600s, VCRs, shopping malls, and less of a need to seek leisure outside in the woods. Therefore, it stands to reason that there would be more fear of nature. Yes, it's beautiful (and several scenes in this film are gorgeous), but it's also unpredictable. The victims in this film have an unfamiliarity with these woods, and that puts them at a disadvantage when battling a camouflaged nemesis who knows the lay of the land.

Understanding that this is the film's central dynamic, the notion of strangers in a strange land being forced to contend with forces with superior knowledge and familiarity of the battlefield, director Andrew Davis (*The Fugitive* [1993]) stages some terrific scares and jolts that underline the uncertainty of the protagonists' predicament. There's a creepy shot early in the film when Zmed howls at the moon, playing around, but then something in the dark—in the foreground and very close by the camera—suddenly shifts. It becomes clear he's being closely observed, and doesn't know it.

Later, the film has tweaked the tension so effectively that during a scene on the lake, when a tree branch suddenly pops out in front of the cast, you actually jump from the shock.

Also, it's interesting to see how cleverly the protagonists fight back against their attacker, taking on the bogeyman on the slasher's own terms, and using the landscape to undercut her. The final girl isn't so much a factor here, but rather it's the ensemble that's important.

It doesn't hurt the film, either, that's its young cast (which includes Daryl Hannah, Rachel Ward, Joe Pantaliano and Mark Metcalf) is uniformly good. Many of these folks went on to successful careers in Hollywood and they do just fine in this film, which probably many would rather take off their résumé.

Fans of the slasher paradigm will be gratified to see it employed in all the expected ways. A campfire ghost story sets the scene, describing a crime in the past involving a strange woman in the woods and her baby.

The film's organizing principle is the forest/wilderness (and so the characters are rangers of a sort), and this setting also grants the villain a headquarters (a cabin in the woods). A uniform differentiates her from the others (camouflaged tatters), as do unique weapons of mass destruction (Rambo-style booby-traps, made out of wood, vine and rock).

Joe Pantaliano of *The Matrix* (1999) and late of TV's *The Sopranos*,

plays Eggars, the film's red herring and, not unexpectedly, partaking in sex and drugs (weed) preceding the killings. The only real drawback in this relatively accomplished attack-in-the-woods-type movie is logic. After discovering the cabin in the woods (and a dog's severed head in the cupboard), the *dramatis personae* resolve to rely on the buddy system and stick together. In the very next scene, characters have ignored that advice and are wandering off willy nilly. That's no way to survive a slasher film. Not even a good one.

The Hunger



Critical Reception

“[A] flashy, send-uppable future shocker which yet has some good moments ... For all its fashion-plate photography and abrupt stylization, this is essentially a very simple story, even if told in such a convoluted way.”—Tom Hutchinson, Roy Pickard, *Horrors: A History of Horror Movies*, Chartwell Books, Inc., 1984, page 186.

“[A] vampire film permeated with a totally effete interior decorator sensibility, it is ... most interesting for its utter lack of sense ... Wan horror, limp sex, and minimal narrative are doused with every sort of visual opulence and chic, in which the mating of Catherine Deneuve and David Bowie looks almost as unisex as the subsequent dalliance between Deneuve and Susan Sarandon.”—John Simon, “*The Hunger*,” *National Review*, June 24, 1983, pages 764–765.

“A sleek and glossy confection that tries to make vampires relevant in the modern age in much the same way that *Interview with the Vampire* did. It’s ultimately all about sex, and this film has an erotic side that gives it some merit, with good performances by its stars, but it takes itself a little too seriously in the end and doesn’t spend quite enough time earning any scares.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Catherine Deneuve (Miriam Blalock); David Bowie (John Blalock); Susan Sarandon (Dr. Sarah Roberts); Cliff De Young (Tom Haver); Beth Ehlers (Alice Cavender); Dan Hedaya (Lt. Allegrezza); Rufus Collings (Charlie Humphries); Suzanne Bertish (Phyllis); James Aubrey (Ron); Willem Dafoe, John Pankow (Men at Phone Booth); Shane Rimmer (Arthur); Ann Magnuson (Woman from Disco);

Bauhaus (Disco Group).

CREW: MGM presents a Richard Shepherd Company Production.
Music: Michel Rubini, Denny Jaeger. **Music Supervised by:** Howard Blake. **Casting:** Mary Goldberg. **Film Editor:** Pamela Power. **Director of Photography:** Stephen Goldblatt. **In charge of production:** Terrence Clegg. **Screenplay by:** Ivan Davis, Michael Thomas. **From the novel by:** Whitley Strieber. **Produced by:** Richard Shepherd. **Directed by:** Tony Scott. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The long-sustained happiness of a vampire couple, Miriam and John Blalock (Deneuve and Bowie), is shattered when he unexpectedly begins to age at an accelerated rate. Miriam, who is over 2,000 years old, has seen this tragedy repeat with all of her lovers over the centuries, and realizes that John is doomed. He grows bitter that “forever” didn’t exactly turn out to be life everlasting.

Dr. Sarah Roberts (Sarandon), the author of *Sleep and Longevity*, a book on aging, becomes involved with the couple, and Miriam sets her eyes on the lovely doctor as her next companion. Desperate—and aging decades by the minute—John feeds on a beloved music student and friend, the teenage Alice (Ehlers), spawning a police investigation of her disappearance.

When John ages to the point where he can no longer function, Miriam seals him in a casket in her attic with the remains of her other lovers, and moves on with Sarah. Sarah and Miriam make love and exchange blood, and soon a new, inhuman and powerful strain of blood begins to consume the doctor.



Vampire punk chic: Miriam Blalock (Catherine Deneuve) and her mate, John (David Bowie), seek prey at a punk rock nightclub in the stylish Tony Scott film *The Hunger* (1983).

Sarah begins to suffer symptoms of withdrawal until Miriam explains to her that she must feed on human blood. When Tom Haver (De Young) visits Miriam's home in hopes of finding the missing Sarah, Miriam realizes that Sarah has found her first meal. Meanwhile, upstairs in the attic, the cast-off lovers of Miriam—in various states of decay—begin to stage an insurrection against the lover who has betrayed them.

COMMENTARY: What does the word *forever* mean to a vampire? In answering that question, Tony Scott's *The Hunger* proves itself one of the most fascinating and unforgettable horror efforts of the 1980s. This was a decade when vampires were not in fashion, and horror movies sought to redefine the long-lived monster to make it feel more current. Humor (*The Lost Boys*), nostalgia (*Fright Night*) and disease metaphors (*Near Dark*) all had their day in 1980s horror cinema, but *The Hunger* remains a compelling and highly cinematic motion picture because it sets the story of its vampires in the modern culture of death: the punk scene.

It is not difficult, after all, to find victims when there are strange folks populating urban dance clubs who are up for *absolutely anything*. It is in that culture of black leather and body piercing that Miriam and

John hunt. In a world of ubiquitous strobe lights, pink hair, nihilism and anonymous sex, even human life is disposable. The vampire couple slashes and drinks their pick-ups for the evening, then throws the corpses out like so much refuse in trash bags.

In *The Hunger*, the bats have finally left the belfry, and vampires are no longer charismatic Europeans confined to castles in Transylvania. They've moved into the modern "scene," and even the film's opening song, which reminds us in its lyrics that Bela Lugosi is dead, acknowledges this fact.

Ultimately, this gorgeous and sumptuous film concerns not just literal vampirism, but a kind of the emotional variety. Miriam will do anything to assuage her greatest fear: loneliness. And so—when the time comes—she casts her lovers aside. She reveals appropriate sadness at this decision, but moves on before the corpse of her current lover is even rotted, so to speak. Although the film displays some fine vampire attacks (in jump cuts), *The Hunger* comes to life during the scene involving Miriam's seduction of Sarah.

Deneuve has a glacial, timeless beauty, a perfection of form, features and movements that makes one believe she could, in fact, be eternal, and she subtly makes the moves on Sarandon's character. Sarah conveniently spills sherry on her T-shirt, requiring her to clean it with water and, well, of course, she's not wearing a bra. Sarah removes her shirt and the movie is off into a sex scene involving flowing white curtains, beautiful female bodies, tender kisses and so forth. These were two of the most sultry and talented actresses of the modern cinema.

Vampirism is really about using, to one degree or another. A vampire uses the blood of the living as nourishment to survive. A person in a relationship with another uses that person's emotional support to thrive and survive. Representing the ultimate in the punk aesthetic, Miriam is a vampire in every sense. She takes lovers such as John Blalock as a "partner," but it is not an equal relationship. She holds all the cards, and does not share with her lovers the secret of eternal life. That secret is that Miriam—as the original vampire—lives forever. Her lovers aren't graced with that. Forever for them actually means three hundred years, and then they age rapidly and rot. In fact, they rot for eternity. Unlike humans, whose end is final, John's will not be. He'll feel himself rotting until the end of time.

Would John have made the same choice to join Miriam back in the 1700s, when she turned him, had she shared the truth about "forever"

with him? Perhaps, perhaps not, but at least then it would have been his choice to make. Instead, Miriam keeps secrets, and when the time comes for her lovers to rot away, she stores them in an attic like a dark secret. Life means nothing to her if it isn't beautiful, if it isn't young, if it doesn't do something specifically for her.

The vampires in *The Hunger* cast reflections and use small blades rather than fangs to draw blood, making them closer to humanity than some unidentifiable “other” that it is easy to hate. And indeed, the film doesn’t really make moral judgments about Miriam. She might be evil, or she may simply be someone who thrives in a world obsessed by youth and beauty, where death is just the latest fix or the latest high. When the dead come to take Miriam for her trespasses against them, it plays more as the revenge of the wronged than as a didactic statement about vampirism. After all, Sarah is there to take her place, and she too, presumably, shall want to be surrounded by music and art, and beautiful, young love.

Tony Scott has gone on to have an impressive career in Hollywood, but few of his films are as dream-like and hypnotic as *The Hunger*. It’s impossible to mistake this film for anything but a product of the early 1980s, when film directors were shooting death scenes like music videos, and punk chic was the new film noir. There’s no other horror film like *The Hunger*, so this meditation on emotional vampirism remains, in fact, eternal.

Jaws 3-D

★ ½

Critical Reception

“Alves can’t visualize suspense, while his editors can’t produce terror. Menacing musical ‘da-dumps,’ in fact, recall *Saturday Night Live* parodies, and you find yourself laughing heartily when Bruce sneaks up on a pyramid of squealing water skiers. If only he’d nipped one.”—Rita Kempley, “*Jaws 3-D* Has No Bite At All,” July 29, 1983, page 17.

“*Jaws 3-D* is a triple-threat. It fails as a man-against-nature allegory, as a horror comic and as a 3-D spectacle.”—Joe Baltake, “3-D Lends Little to Saga of the Killer White,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, July 26, 1983, page 37.

“*Jaws 3-D* is a horror movie trying to pass itself off as an adventure film. The shark is in an enclosed space—the waters of Sea World—

with a slew of victims. It is like an underwater *Halloween*, and, as is customary in such films, people act with a consistent stupidity that brings them within reach of the villain.”—Desmond Ryan, “*Jaws 3-D: Gore and Not Much More*,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 25, 1983, page D01.

“It bites. Richard Matheson was involved in this monstrosity? *Jaws 2* never looked so good. The 3-D is boring, the sharks are dopey, and it all looks like a commercial for Sea World.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dennis Quaid (Mike Brody); Bess Armstrong (Kathryn Morgan); Simon MacCorkindale (Philip Fitzroyce); Louis Gossett Jr. (Calvin Bouchard); John Putch (Sean Brody); Lea Thompson (Kelly Ann Bukowski); P.H. Moriarity (Jack Tate); Dan Blasko (Dan); Liz Morris (Liz); Lisa Maurer (Ethel); Harry Grant (Shelby Overman); Andy Hansen (Silver Bullet); P.T. Harris (Tunnel Guide); John Edson, Jr. (Bob Woodbury); Kaye Stevens (Mrs. Kallender); Archie Valliere (Leonard Glass); Alonzo Ward (Fred); Cathy Cervenka (Sherrie); Jane Hroner (Suzie); Kathie Jenkins (Sheila); Steve Mellor (Announcer); Les Alford (Reporter); Gary Anstaett (Reporter); Scott Christoff (Workman).

CREW: *Presented by:* Alan Landsburg Productions. *Casting:* Randy Stone. *Music:* Alan Parker. *Shark Theme:* John Williams. *Associate Producer:* David Kappes. *Film Editor:* Randy Roberts. *Production Design:* Woods Mackintosh. *Director of Photography:* James A. Contner. *Executive Producers:* Alan Landsburg, Howard Lipstone. *Suggested by the Novel Jaws by:* Peter Benchley. *Screenplay by:* Richard Matheson, Carl Gottlieb. *Story by:* Guerdon Trueblood. *Produced by:* Rupert Hitzig. *Visual Creature Consultant:* Roy Arbogast. *Visual Design Consultant:* Philip Abramson. *Special Photographic and Optical Effects by:* Praxis Film Works, Inc./Robert Blalack. *Special Visual Effects, Miniatures/Electronic Composites:* Private Stock Effects. *Filmed in Arrivision 3-D.* *Directed by:* Joe Alves. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young great white shark follows a troupe of water skiers including Kelly Ann (Thompson) into the lagoon around the world's largest sea park, Florida's Sea World. Unbeknownst to the park's business manager, Bouchard (Gossett), its marine biologist Kathryn Morgan (Armstrong) and its chief engineer and architect, Amity's Michael Brody (Quaid), the shark's thirty-five-foot mother has also entered these placid waters. With the help of world-famous adventurer

Philip Fitzroyce (MacCorkindale), Morgan and Brody proceed to capture the baby shark for the park, unaware that their action will spur a full-on attack from Mommy. Efforts are made to kill the gigantic shark, but the great white does the unexpected and, after trapping a group of tourists in an underwater corridor, turns its attention directly towards Bouchard's underwater command center. Kathryn, Mike and Bouchard watch in horror as the mammoth predator breaches the protected window, and comes straight at them...

COMMENTARY: Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) is an indisputable horror classic. It's a "perfect escapist entertainment," I wrote in *Horror Films of the 1970s*, "a beautiful film, with the last act set entirely on the deep blue sea. This sequence is breathtaking and frightening, and the audience is reminded that the ocean is not only a dangerous world, but a lovely, seductive one as well."

And *Jaws II* (1978), Jeannot Szwarc's sequel? No masterpiece, that film, but a good time at the movies nonetheless, especially if one is pre-disposed to enjoy the genre. It's certainly worth the price of admission, in no small part because Roy Scheider returned to essay the role of Chief Brody, Amity's shark-fearing policeman.

And *Jaws 3-D*? The shark franchise enters the 1980s with a film so horrid, so piss-poor that the whole enterprise ... sinks. Joe Alves directs this film, but it would be unfair to lay all the problems at his doorstep. Visually, the film is undercut by the decision to shoot in 3-D, which results in not just lousy special effects, but a murky, gray look. And thematically, the screenplay offers Alves no help; the characters and the situations are—politely putting it—"stock."

Jaws 3-D opens with real footage of a small fish swimming in the sea. Then a red dye is released into the sea, masquerading as blood. It fills the frame, and the movie focuses on a 3-D miniature of a fish-head, popping out in 3-D. It looks incredibly phony, and it's all downhill from that.

When the shark attacks Kathryn and Mike at sea, the assault is filmed with fast-motion photography to make it seem exciting. This has the opposite effect since fast-motion photography is usually indicative of comedy. Worse than a mis-applied photographic technique, there are totally incongruous, inconsistent shots of the attacking shark in this set piece. At one point, the shark attacks and rams a sunken galleon, and it is clearly a miniature model shark with a mouth molded in the open position.

The rest of the muddy underwater scenes are no better. Even worse, the climax is a total botch. The great white shark has entered the Sea World facility through a large pipe, and is now free to attack the command center, where Gossett, Quaid, and Armstrong are stationed. As the shark approaches, the film cuts to three separate, lingering slow-motion shots of these actors reacting, open-mouthed. A group shot would have had the same impact, and in three separate cuts, it just seems silly. Then, the fake model shark shatters the glass and floods the compartment, and the movie substitutes the mechanical, life-sized shark. Again, the footage doesn't match.

The cheapness of this *Jaws* venture is truly alarming. Technical mistakes are a dime a dozen in this film, and it's shocking that Universal would release such a shoddy film. For instance, the film has trouble with daylight and night. At one point, after a night drinking in a bar, Armstrong and Quaid walk on the beach together and it's bright as daylight. Then, in the next scene it's pitch black again as Lea Thompson and John Putch take a dip. Another incongruity: During one sequence the shark pulls a swimmer right out of his raft, but there's never a shot of the shark breaking water. The yellow inflatable raft just gets sucked down all of a sudden. What is this, blood beach?

Finally, the movie is so slipshod from a technical perspective that it can't even be bothered to provide a shot of Louis Gossett after the command center attack to indicate his character survived. In a line that was likely looped later, a character spontaneous declares, "Calvin made it!" Really? Where?

Still, a clever director and production team can overcome bad special effects, if not technical incompetence, to craft a horrific, effective and scary horror movie (*The Boogens* [1982] is a prime example of such ingenuity). That doesn't happen here either, and the fault lays squarely with the script (which was, apparently, conceived by the great Richard Matheson and *Jaws'* Carl Gottlieb). This is a screenplay that asks us to believe that the character Fitzroyce, played by Simon MacCorkindale, is a world-renowned photographer who has been battling whale boats. He's so famous, in fact, that other characters in the film recognize him on sight Yet Fitzroyce has arrived at a Sea World franchise to photograph water skiers? That's his assignment? Calvin must be paying him well.

Even more contrived is the film's climax. Fitzroyce traps the great white in the pipe (where the shark moves very, very slowly) and the camera cuts to a shot from inside the shark's mouth, from the point of view of its stomach, I guess. Anyway, we're looking out of the shark as

Fitzroyce scrambles and struggles to get out of the way of the chomping jaws. Then there's another spray of red dye as blood, and the next shot reveals that Fitzroyce is inside the shark's mouth. The editing is nonsensical, and doesn't make any kind of sense. But what's truly funny is that Fitzroyce doesn't get digested or anything. He lies in the shark's mouth, gripping a hand grenade, so that when the shark breaks into the command center, the heroes can reach the grenade and pull the pin to destroy the shark. There is no more ridiculous ending in 1980s horror cinema ... until *Jaws: The Revenge* in 1987.

Jaws 3-D features no character that the audience ever cares about (expect maybe the dolphins), it's hard to watch because the 3-D process makes the film murky, the special effects stink, and the movie isn't scary. This film opened big when it was released in 1983, and then bad word of mouth made business drop off a whopping forty percent.

LEGACY: The *Jaws* saga returned with an even more ludicrous, cheap jack entry in 1987, *Jaws: The Revenge*. In that instance, it was personal. In another funny footnote, *Back to the Future II* (1990) featured a future where the umpteenth sequel to *Jaws* was showing in a theater, only this time featuring a holographic shark. Star Michael J. Fox noted that the shark still looked "fake."

The Keep

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"[It] boasts some impressive moments visually, but is ruined by poor performances ... and a nightmarishly bad soundtrack by Tangerine Dream."—Jeremy Dyson, *Bright Darkness: The Lost Art of the Supernatural Horror Film*, Cassell, 1997, page 254.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Scott Glenn (Glaeken); Alberta Watson (Eva Cuza); Jurgen Prochnow (Captain Woermann); Robert Prosky (Father Fonescu); Gabriel Byrne (Major Koempferr); Ian McKellen (Dr. Theodor Cuza); Morgan Sheppard (Alexandru); Royston Tickner (Tomescu); Philip Joseph (Sgt. Oster); Michael Carter (Molasar).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Present a Howard W. Koch Jr./Gene Kirkwood Production. *Music:* Tangerine Dream. *Film Editor:* Dov

Hoenig. *Director of Photography*: Alex Thomason. *Production Design*: John Box. *Executive Producer*: Colin M. Brewster. *Based on the novel by*: F. Paul Wilson. *Produced by*: Gene Kirkwood and Howard W. Koch. *Written and Directed by*: Michael Mann. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Nazi Captain Woermann (Prochnow) arrives in a small town in Romania's Carpathian Mountains with a caravan of trucks and soldiers and takes command in a new headquarters: a mysterious and ancient Keep decorated with 108 small crosses made of nickel.

The caretaker, who has minded the Keep in the manner of his father and grandfather before him, warns the Germans not to stay ... that they will suffer horrible nightmares there. His warnings are ignored. Instead, soldiers in search of treasure attempt to loot the Keep, removing a thick block from the underlying structure. They open a hole into a vast, seemingly empty chamber.

In truth, they have released a ferocious evil force. When five Nazi soldiers die under mysterious circumstances following this breach, a new, harsher commander, Major Koempferr (Byrne), takes command and imposes draconian measures on the nearby village.

Meanwhile, far away in Athens, a mysterious stranger called Glaeken (Glenn) makes for the Keep even as a Jewish scientist, Dr. Cuza (McKellen), and his daughter Eva (Watson) are transported from a death camp to the Keep to translate a message scrawled on the wall, one that reads in ancient writing, "I Will Be Free."

Suffering from a debilitating disease, Dr. Cuza comes to realize that the monster in the Keep can strike a blow against the Nazis around the world if only it can be released from the prison of this fortress. But is the evil he hopes to release into the world worse than that unleashed by Hitler?

COMMENTARY: Hypnotic. Dreamy. Mesmerizing. Entrancing. These are the descriptors that pop immediately into the mind when contemplating director Michael (Manhunter [1986]) Mann's sumptuous *The Keep*. His strange film, a weird vampire movie in only the most oblique way, is a notable example of cinematic style triumphing over hackneyed substance. Between the trance-like score provided by Tangerine Dream and the misty, expressive visualizations, enraptured viewers will feel as though they've tumbled down the rabbit hole into a universe of the surreal and strange.

As *The Keep* opens, and a Nazi caravan drives into the Carpathian Mountains, wisps of fog and smoke roll before the camera, following thunder and rain. Almost immediately, one feels that a threshold has been breached and that the journey from the real to the supernatural has begun. It's an appropriate note to begin on, since the film involves the breaching of just such a threshold, that ancient castle, and the release of an evil so horrifying it even makes the Nazis tremble.

When the Keep is breached, Mann provides a pullback that reveals the interior of the structure. It's a pullback into the very caverns of the mountains, and for all intents and purposes, a pullback right into infinity. That's how big the shot is (and remember, this is pre-CG). The camera retracts and retracts, registering images of a prison composed of rock and dirt. On and on it goes ... and then there's something else in the dark too. A presence.



Molasar Unbound: The terror is freed in Michael Mann's *The Keep* (1983).

Mann excels at staging strange shots. There are misty corridors revealed with diffuse, colored light, and viewers can almost feel the

chill of the ancient structure. In one scene, the evil force prevents the Nazis from raping Eva, and it takes the form of a cloud to carry her free. The film also dwells on how icons like the swastika and the cross can be co-opted for evil means.

The novel on which *The Keep* is based was more explicitly a vampire tale, and one can make out the edges of a vampire story in this weird and wonderful film. Molosar is the ancient evil (living in Transylvania, or thereabouts) who gives a new life to the frail Dr. Cuza, played by Ian McKellen. He's trapped by the nickel crosses (which glow a blinding white light when the Nazis tamper with them). The Glaeken (Scott Glenn) is a sort of immortal vampire killer, but the film labors to keep these genre clichés at arm's distance, so that the film feels fresh, rather than hackneyed; new rather than a regurgitation of the Gothic.

Beautifully crafted in terms of its visuals and soundtrack, *The Keep* is rather frustrating in terms of its narrative. Glaeken remains a mystery, and the true nature of Molosar is never quite made plain. What is he, an ancient deity? A Lovecraft-style Old One? The movie reveals little beside his age and evil nature, even as it depicts him, rather disappointingly, as a man in a bad monster suit, one replete with glowing red eyes and rubber muscles. The movie ends in anti-dramatic fashion with a spectacular but unexplained light show—the equivalent of *Star Wars'* light sabers, only without the explanation that they are the instrumentation of the Jedi and Sith.

The most satisfying thematic element involves Dr. Cuza. He hates the Nazis so much that he releases a monster ten times worse than Hitler to destroy them. He has been blinded by his rage (the power of the Dark Side?) and so, because of that hate, becomes the very thing he despises: evil. There's a lesson here that hate doesn't make one strong, and that wanting to see your enemies destroyed so badly only perpetuates a new evil.

Almost as interesting as *The Keep*'s visuals and theme about self-defeating hatred is the history of this film's distribution and final form. The movie I screened for this book, to the best of my memory, is not the same as the one I saw in theaters in 1983. The accent was decidedly different. I remember longer scenes involving the routing of the Germans, and more scenes with Prochnow's character discussing the nature of evil. There are definitely alternate versions of *The Keep*, and it would be nice to see an official director's cut now that Michael Mann has graduated into the top tier of Hollywood filmmakers.

The Lift

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Huub Stapel (Felix Adelaar); Willeke Van Amnulrooy (Mieke De Boer); Josine Van Dalsum (Saskia Adelaar); Manfred De Graaf (Real Estate Agent); Onno Molenkamp (Blind Man); Siem Vroom (Police Inspector); Serge-Henri Valcke (Psychiatrist); Pieter Lutz, Huib Broos (Men in Lift); Liz Snoijink, Wiske Sterringa (Women in Lift); Theor Pont (Male Nurse); Johan Hobo, Matthias Maat, Ger Van Groningen (Waiters); Piet Romer, Gerard Thoolen, Hans Veerman, Van Wijk, Carola Gijsbers.

CREW: Mattijs Van Heijningen Presents a film by Dick Maas. *Director of Photography:* Marc Felperlaan. *Art Director:* Harry Ammerlaan. *Costume Designer:* Jany Hubar. *Makeup and Hair:* Nancy Baudoux. *Special Effects:* Leo Cahn. *Sound Mixer:* George Bossaers. *Production Manager:* Jos Van Der Linden. *Film Editor:* Hans Van Dongen. *Produced by:* Mattijs Van Heijningen. *Screenplay Music and Directed by:* Dick Maas. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Those damn machines will be the death of us all one day.”—A word to the wise in *The Lift*.

SYNOPSIS: Felix (Stapel), an elevator repairman, is summoned to fix a lift in a hi-tech office building where four restaurant customers recently suffocated during a lightning strike. He finds nothing wrong with the lift, but the next day, a blind man (Molenkamp) falls down the shaft to his death when the door opens but reveals no car. Then a security man gets his head caught between the closing doors, and is decapitated when the car lowers on him. Felix comes to believe that the elevator may be growing self-aware, thanks to an unusual new technology employed by Rising Sun Electronic in its controls. He pursues this theory by tracking down the building's last repairman and finding out why he went insane.

COMMENTARY: Horror movies are really hurting for material, it appears, when they resort to featuring evil laundry machines (*The Mangler*) or evil elevators, as in this Dutch effort. The problem inherent in these films is that the horror can easily be avoided, simply by not setting foot near the offending device. Evil elevator decapitating people. I'd avoid it like the plague. Ditto for an evil industrial folding machine.

To *The Lift*'s credit, it vainly but doggedly attempts to work up fear for this terrible threat. "Do you know how many victims get stuck in an elevator a year?" one character asks with a solemn sense of foreboding. The answer is 250,000 people, and now I'm certain not to get into an elevator the next time I'm in Europe. This information is supposed to be fear-provoking, but again, one malfunctioning elevator in one isolated office building just doesn't generate thrills. Don't shop there, and don't eat at the restaurant and then go upstairs.

The secret behind the evil elevator turns out to be a micro-chip from a Japanese tech company, a solution that evidences the seemingly global fear in the 1980s that Japanese VCRs, cars and other durable goods (and technologies) would succeed where Pearl Harbor had failed. Turns out that the technology involved in the malfunctioning elevator—much like the *Voyager*'s gel packs on *Star Trek: Voyager* in the 1990s—is biological, organic, and that the elevator's sick.

The Lift features several gory death scenes, and that's something to be proud of, I guess. There's a terrible and frightening decapitation, and that may be the film's highlight. In terms of suspense, some tension is generated when a little girl—unsupervised while her mom and the boss share a quickie—wanders too close to the evil elevator. Personally, I get a real kick out of the film's utterly ridiculous dialogue. My favorite line: "I should examine the entire shaft ... but that could take days."

I'm also particularly fond of the movie's ad-line: "Take the stairs, take the stairs. For God's sake, take the stairs." That's not only funny, it's good advice from a healthy-living standpoint too. Another suggestion to live a long, healthy life? Avoid *The Lift*.

Mortuary

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mary McDonough (Christie Parson); David Wallace (Greg Stevens); Bill Paxton (Paul Andrew); Lynda Day George (Eve Parson); Christopher George (Hank Andrews); Curt Ayers (Jim); Bil Conklin (Sheriff Duncan); Donna Garrett (Mrs. Andrews); Greg Kaye (Mark); Denis Mandel (Josh); Violet Manes (Mortuary Customer); Alvy Moore (Bob Stevens); Danny Rogers (Dr. Parson); Beth Schaffel (Bonnie); Marlene Schmidt (Lois Stevens).

CREW: Presented by: Hickmar Productions Inc. Music: John Cacavas. Director of Photography: Gary Graver. Film Editor: Stanford C. Allen. Associate Producers: Bernard Hodes, Ernest Kaye. Special Effects/Makeup: Jim Gillespie, Diane Seletos. Stunt Coordinator: Jim Winburn. Written and Produced by: Howard Avedis, Marlene Schmidt. Directed by: Howard Avedis. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Josh (Mandel) and Greg (Wallace), students from Cliffside Junior College, witness a séance in a local warehouse, officiated by the mortuary owner, Mr. Andrews (George), and attended by a number of local suburban women, including Greg's girlfriend Christie's mother (Day George), Eve Parson.

Someone murders Josh and steals the van, leaving Greg and Christie (McDonough) to wonder what is happening, and where Josh disappeared. Meanwhile, a killer in a black cape and armed with an embalming needle begins stalking Christie, and she suspects her mother is trying to drive her crazy after Greg tells her he saw her at the Satanic ritual. At the same time, Mr. Andrews' nerdy and creepy son Paul (Paxton) makes advances on Christie against her will. The killer strikes again and again, and Christie and Greg learn that the séances are innocent, that her mother is merely trying to make contact with her dead husband who—as it turns out—was Paul's psychiatrist. The identity of the killer soon becomes plain when he kills Mrs. Parson in her bed, abducts Christie and brings her back to the mortuary to embalm her. His plan is to marry the dead woman and unite the Parson and Andrews families.

COMMENTARY: The sad truth about 1980s slasher films, one gleaned after watching dozens, is that the vast majority of these movies are just plain average. Depressingly so, actually. These films are mediocre, relying on effects and stock characters from the paradigm pantry rather than plumbing the depths of audience dreads. *Mortuary*, which features a young Bill Paxton as a psychotic lunatic and “outsider” and Christopher and Lynda Day George (the cut-rate 1980s horror Astaire and Rogers) as red herrings, is one example of this vast pack of middling horrors. It’s not terrible, and a few moments reveal flashes of ingenuity. However, the rest is just ... boring, and rather farfetched.

On the latter front, consider that young Paul Andrews (Paxton), our psychotic killer, is an outsider, a music geek who likes music. He also considers embalming an art. “There’s a delicate balance to this ... it’s like being a good cook,” he suggests. That’s all well and good, as is Paul’s unique choice of a weapon, an embalming needle. But how does his chosen garb reflect his madness? Why does he go around in white

pancake makeup with heavy black eye shadow? What's the point, and isn't makeup such as this really an affectation that isn't wise? Since Paul attempts to fit in with his peers (who are not killers) it would make sense for him to keep things simple, right? No makeup so he can just retreat back into the pack, another nerd at school. But no, he wears a cloak and undead makeup, which is just goofy.

Also farfetched is the film's attempt at misdirection. The film opens with two teens, Josh and Greg, discovering a Satanic ritual. Well, it turns out this séance isn't evil, just a way for Christie's mom—not a villain at all—to contact her dead husband. She was just kidding with all that Satan stuff!

Another plot point that goes nowhere involves Christie's house. The lights and power keep fluctuating, on and off. "Is this house haunted?" one character wonders. "Something weird's going on," concludes another. But, of course, the house isn't really haunted, there's just really something wrong with the power. It's a movie malfunction, you know the type: power goes off whenever the plot requires a jolt, or for characters to not have use of the telephone. That's all. No big deal. Again, why bring up the power (and the idea of a haunted house) just to dismiss it totally?

It's worth noting too that the characters who appear in this film don't make decisions or react in any way the viewer would recognize as remotely human. For instance, Christie's mom, played by Lynda Day George, notes at an important moment the following information: "Honey, Paul is psychotic." She then goes on to reveal that Paul was a patient of Christie's therapist father, and that he wanted to marry Christie. Why is her mom only telling Christie this important information *now*? And why does Christie's mom believe that her husband's death was an accident, given Paul's nature as a psychotic? And why has she been trying to convince Christie *throughout the entire movie* that she's just hyper and overwrought, if there really is a clear and present danger in Paul?

The movie doesn't make sense.

Finally, *Mortuary* does have an interesting organizing principle: the mortuary, its tools (embalming needles included) and its stock and trade (corpses). It even uses its organizing principle with a degree of humor. One casket shopper says to another, straight-faced: "Honey, I don't think you're going to be comfortable in this one." Yet Paul's costume doesn't fit in with a funeral home's trade and the final revelation that Paul is propping up corpses to stage a wedding for

himself and Christie is reminiscent of the birthday guests in the conclusion of 1982's *Happy Birthday to Me*. So it doesn't really come off as original or that neat. And a wedding, of course, was also the organizing principle of *He Knows You're Alone* (1980), so give *Mortuary* another demerit.

How much one enjoys *Mortuary* will depend on how much patience one has for the slasher paradigm when it's carried out with only a modicum of innovation. It's nice to see Paxton playing a nutcase (who conducts an invisible orchestra in one scene) but ultimately this is a story you've seen a dozen times before.

Night Warning

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jimmy McNichol (Billy Lynch); Susan Tyrrell (Aunt Cheryl); Bo Svenson (Detective Joe Carlson); Marcia Lewis (Margie); Julia Duffy (Julie Linden); Steve Eastin (Tom Landers); Caskey Swaim (Phil Brody); Britt Leach (Sgt. Cook); Bill Paxton (Eddie).

CREW: A Dennis D. Hennessy/Richard Carrothers Presentation. *Casting:* Joan Simmons. *Co-Producer:* Eugene Mazzola. *Film Editor:* Ted Nicolaou. *Music:* Bruce Langhorne. *Director of Photography:* Robbie Greenberg. *Written by:* Stephen Breimer, Alan Jay Glueckman, Boon Collins. *Story by:* Alan Jay Glueckman, Boon Collins. *Producer:* Stephen Breimer. *Executive Producers:* Dennis D. Hennessy, Richard Carrothers. *Song "Little Boy Billy"* *Words and Music by:* Joyce Bulifant. *Directed by:* William Asher. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three-year-old Billy remains with his Aunt Cheryl (Tyrrell) while his parents go away on a trip, but the brakes in his parents' car fail on a mountain road and both Mom and Dad are killed in an accident involving a logging truck. Fourteen years later, Billy (McNichol) is seventeen, having been raised by his batty aunt, and hopes to attend the University of Denver over her strenuous objections. When a visiting TV repairman won't have sex with her, Cheryl stabs him to death with a butcher knife. Detective Carlson suspects Billy is the murderer. Carlson's suspicions are reinforced when the homophobic officer learns that the TV repairman and Billy's basketball coach were gay lovers. He thinks Billy was the "third" lover in that relationship, even though Billy has a girlfriend, Julie (Duffy).

Billy attempts to prove his innocence but doesn't want to see his aunt go to jail, so is caught in a terrible predicament. Worse, Aunt Cheryl wants Julie—a threat to her relationship with Billy—dead.

COMMENTARY: Forget *Mommie Dearest* (1980), *Night Warning* proves itself the 1980's most twisted, bizarre cinematic vision of motherhood. A true gem of the decade, one often lumped with the slasher pack, *Night Warning* spotlights an incredible performance by Susan Tyrrell as Aunt Cheryl, the film's sinister mother figure. She's a woman with no boundaries at all, acting alternately kittenish, cloying, abusive and flirtatious ... with her nephew!

Night Warning opens memorably with an accident on the road, as the brakes of a car (carrying young Billy's parents) mysteriously fail, and the vehicle rams a logging truck. In one of the most convincing decapitations ever put on the silver screen, a log breaks through the windshield and strikes Billy's dad in the head. Director William Asher's camera is positioned low, to catch all the action, and it's shockingly, surprisingly graphic.

After this strong start, *Night Warning* settles into a drama about the strange home life of Billy, living with his disturbingly affectionate aunt. She tells him creepy things like "I'm going to be your date tomorrow night," and ruins his shot at attending the University of Denver by dosing his milk with drugs before a big basketball game. The film makes a big deal of Cheryl continually poisoning Billy's milk, a symbol of her twisted motherhood. Milk, of course, represents human kindness, nurturing and motherhood, but Cheryl literally force feeds Billy the corrupted fluid, suggesting an evil, sickening brand of motherhood (appropriate since Cheryl is—in fact—Billy's biological mother). Billy is rendered impotent by the milk, infantilized by Cheryl's inappropriate and inimical ministrations. Also, notice how the attic room fixed for Billy by Cheryl is filled with items like stuffed animals and baby toys. Cheryl is desperate to keep him in her life; and herself as the primary female in his.

Cheryl is the most offensive and aggressive of mothers, and there's a stereotype in American culture that overbearing mothers produce homosexual sons. It's a terrain the film explores in its evocation of a strange mother-son relationship. In the film, Billy is constantly depicted in terms that heighten awareness of his sexual being.

Early on, Billy is depicted performing athletically on a basketball court, shirtless. The film freeze frames on images of his physical accomplishments, watched by his admiring girlfriend, Julie. These shots invite the audience to consider Billy an object of sexual desire. His status as gay is constantly brought up by his teammate and nemesis, played by Bill Paxton, who tells him to keep his "queer hands" off of him. Later, Detective Carlson, a raging homophobe, accuses Billy of being gay, of being the coach's "butt boy." Before the film is over, Billy has been seen without his shirt five times (and in one sex scene with Julie), but one has to wonder why the gay undertones, unless it's to make another statement about Cheryl's inappropriate mothering. Look, she's raised a sissy boy!

That's an important element of the plot, since the climax rests on Billy asserting his manhood in two ways. First in killing his accuser, Detective Carlson, thus ending the speculation about his manhood. And secondly, by killing Cheryl in a way that echoes heterosexual intercourse. Billy impales his aunt with a tire iron, finally giving her the penetration—a lethal one—she so richly deserves. He has proved his machismo by no longer suckling at the tit of his evil mama, and no longer taking accusations of homosexuality without response. Billy finally becomes an effective hero, fighting back, and the movie equates that response with maleness. When Cheryl strangles Billy with a phone cord and says "I'm your girlfriend now," that's the last straw and he stabs her. Ironically, their struggle—which finds their bodies intertwined and her legs wrapped around Billy—resembles a sexual position.

Please note that I am not approving or rejecting *Night Warning*'s thesis on sexual roles and stereotypes, only stating that a strong sub-text exists and flourishes in this unusual psycho-thriller. And if that thesis is truthful, wrong or plain silly, it's powerfully and artistically vetted. As are the murder sequences and the stalking shots.

Night Warning is a carefully crafted and tense thriller that, even if it is not championed by the horror faithful, at least deserves to be seen by more people. Writing this book, I was disappointed at how few diamonds in the rough existed. I found many such films in the 1970s

and assumed the same would be true in the 1980s, but in truth, there is just a fistful of them. And *Night Warning* is among that select list.

Nightmares

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST:

Segment #1: “Terror in Topanga”: Cristina Raines (Wife); Jome Lambie (Husband); Anthony James (Clerk); Clare Nono (Newswoman); Raleigh Bond (Neighbor); Robert Phelps (Newsman); Dixie Lynn Royce (Little Girl); Lee James Jude (Glazier)

Segment #2: “The Bishop of Battle”: Emilio Estevez (J.J. Cooney); Louis Giambalvo (Mr. Cooney); Moon Zappa (Pamela); Billy Jacoby (Zock); Gary Cervantes (Mazenza); C. Stewart Burnes (Root); Andre Diaz (Pedro); Joel Holman (Z. Man).

Segment #3: “The Benediction”: Lance Henriksen (Father Frank MacLoed); Tony Plana (Father Del Amo); Timothy Scott (Highway Patrolman); Robin Gammell (Bishop); Rose Marie Campos (Mother).

Segment #4: “Night of the Rat”: Richard Masur (Steven Houston); Veronica Cartwright (Claire Houston); Bridgette Anderson (Brooke Houston); Albert Hague (Mel Keefer); Howard F. Flynn (Radio Announcer).

CREW: *Executive Producers*: Andrew Mirisch, Alex Beaton. *Film Editors*: Rod Stephens, Michael Brown. *Production Designer*: Dean Edward Mitzner. *Art Director*: Jack Taylor. *Directors of Photography*: Gerald Perry Finneman (Segments 1 & 2); Mario Di Leo (Segments 3 & 4). *Produced by*: Christopher Crowe. *Music*: Craig Safan. *Casting*: Anita Dann. *Video Game Special Effects*: Bo Gehring Associates. *Directed by*: Joseph Sargent. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four nightmarish tales of terror. In the first, a harried woman (Raines) goes out for cigarettes late at night even though an escaped mental patient and psycho-killer is loose nearby in the Topanga area. She nearly runs out of gas and stops at an isolated station with a suspicious-looking attendant.

In the second tale, “The Bishop of Battle,” a young hotshot and hustler

named J.J. (Estevez) cheats some arcade jockeys out of twenty-five dollars to raise money to beat level 13 on his favorite game, "The Bishop of Battle." With his grades falling and friends abandoning him, J.J. breaks into the arcade one night and makes a final play for Level 13, but he finds to his surprise and terror that the game is more real than he ever imagined.

In the third tale, a priest who has lost faith, Father Frank MacLoed (Henriksen), leaves his mission in the desert out of despair but has his faith restored after a deadly confrontation on the road with a pick-up truck driven by the Devil (defeated by a little handy holy water).

Finally, "Night of the Rat," sees a nice suburban family, the Houstons, challenged by an oversized and seemingly unkillable rat. When the monstrous rodent perches on little Brooke's (Anderson) bed, parents Steve (Masur) and Claire (Cartwright) must divine its motives. And it may have something to do with the smaller baby rat they trapped and killed in the attic...

COMMENTARY: *Nightmares* is an unexpectedly scary horror anthology, one that flew under the critical radar when released in 1983. Nonetheless it gets the job done with workmanlike efficiency. Except for a few side trips into silly social commentary, *Nightmares* is damn scary.

Unlike every other horror anthology produced in the 1980s, *Nightmares* boasts no bookend or skeletal structure on which to hang its four tales of the macabre. This plain and basic approach feels like further evidence of the movie's charming determination just to get matters over with. Director Joseph Sargent doesn't mess around: He gets down to action with a minimum of fuss.



Father McLoed (Lance Henriksen) has a run-in with the Devil, who's driving a black pickup. From "The Benediction," the third segment of Joseph Sargent's *Nightmares* (1983).

The first story centers on the art of misdirection (and a not very subtle anti-smoking message) as Cristina Raines plays a housewife looking for a smoke while a serial killer is loose nearby. “Non-addicts cannot understand,” she insists, when confronted with the need for a fix. She takes out the car in a huff and drives about a dark valley (and there’s nice use of crickets and coyotes amongst the soundtrack background noise). Raines’ smoker comes to regret her need for a fix when the killer finds a neat little spot in the back seat of her car.

This tale, “Terror in Topanga,” wants audiences to believe that a creepy-looking gas station attendant is the escaped lunatic, but he’s a red herring. This story is short and sweet, unencumbered by anything except a line-drive narrative of genuine terror. “Terror in Topanga” quickly captures the feeling of driving out alone at night, with the gas gauge hovering dangerously near empty.

The second story gazes at the arcade culture of the 1980s, and it’s important to remember that *The Last Starfighter* also premiered in 1983. Here, video game junkie J.J. (Emilio Estevez) grows addicted to conquering “The Bishop of Battle,” a video game boogeyman who looks woefully antiquated with his simple line graphics and cheesy laser blasts. As J.J. plays the game continuously, the camera focuses

on his sweaty palms and red, bloodshot eyes. J.J. becomes increasingly antisocial and ignores his girlfriend. His grades drop. “Jerry, he’s not himself,” his mother insists with worry.

“I’m feeling hot, man; I’m feeling really hot!” J.J. insists, hopping around like a drug addict, in desperate need of more quarters to feed the beast. The not so subtle moral message: *Video games are bad for your health!*

Of course, that’s an utterly ridiculous conclusion, but this second tale handily expresses the thrill and attraction of video games: of doing well, being tense, of inching a little further, level by level. In a way, these games are addictive, I suppose, but they’re certainly not a menace to society. Unless, like “The Bishop of Battle,” they’re populated by violent lawnmower men. When J.J. finally reaches Level 13 in the game, spaceships emerge from the arcade machine to attack him. The sting in the tale/tail finds the addict trapped forever in his beloved game, now all too real.

In “The Benediction,” which feels inspired by Steven Spielberg’s *Duel* (1971), Lance Henriksen plays a priest. He conquers his crisis in faith by battling out it with the Devil’s pick-up truck on a lonely highway. Again, there’s precious little meat on these bones, but strangely, that’s just fine. Nothing gets in the way of the horror as a priest and an unseen Devil duke it out in their respective vehicles. In one funny touch, an upside down crucifix is depicted hanging under the rearview mirror of the Devil’s truck. Like *Duel*, we never actually see Satan.



Rats! The Houston family (Veronica Cartwright, Bridgette Anderson, and Richard Masur) realize they have a pest control problem in "Night of the Rat," the final installment in the horror anthology *Nightmares*.

In the final tale, a family is under siege by a giant rat. A yuppie dad transgresses badly and kills one of its babies, leading the oversized vermin to go after his child instead. In 1983, this was probably the most effective piece of the four—and by far the scariest—but today

the special effects don't hold up very well, and that undercuts the terror.

Nightmares hums along to its destination with nary a sideways glance. While other anthologies lose and gain momentum in fits and starts, purposefully vetting diverse stories, *Nightmares* doesn't change tonally from one tale to the next. Every one is designed to be scary and heart-stopping, and so there's neither a funny ("The Lonely Death of Jordy Verrill") or maudlin tale ("Kick the Can") stinking up the pack. Also, the cast is particularly strong, and director Sargent gives the proceedings a cinematic, attractive glean. Unlike some TV anthologies, which look like they were shot on video with two actors and one set, the production values are strong enough to give the world of *Nightmares* some verisimilitude. The stories may be basic, even uninventive, but fear is basic too.

Of Unknown Origin

★★★★

Critical Reception

"Man vs. rat. It hadn't really been done before, and for anyone who's ever hunted an insect or a rodent in an apartment, this movie's going to get you in on the hunt. There are primal desires at play in this film, a blood lust for the creatures that won't lie down and die in front of us on request."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Weller (Bart Hughes); Jennifer Dale (Lorrie Wells); Lawrence Dane (Eliot Riverton); Kenneth Welsh (James Hall); Louis Del Grande (Clete); Maury Chaykin (Dan Errol); Keith Knight (Hardware Salesman); Shannon Tweed (Meg Hughes); Leif Anderson (Peter Hughes); Jimmy Tapp (Meg's Father).

CREW: Pierre David and Lawrence Ness present a George P. Cosmatos Film. *Post-Production Supervisor:* Bill Wiggins. *Supervising Sound Editor:* Leslie Hodgson. *Production Supervisor:* Roger Heroux. *Production Designer:* Anne Pritchard. *Film Editor:* Roberto Silvi. *Music Composed by:* Ken Wennberg. *Director of Photography:* Rene Verzier. *Executive Producer:* Pierre David. *Screenplay by:* Brian Taggart. *Based on the book "The Visitor" by:* Chauncey G. Parker III. *Produced by:* Claude Heroux. *Special Effects Makeup:* Stephen Dupuis. *Special Effects:* Jacques

Godbout, Louis Craig. *Animal Handler*: Bob Tschanz. *Animal Trainer*: Robert Dunn. *Directed by*: George P. Cosmatos. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You gotta remember ... a rat is a survivor.”—Some folksy wisdom from Clete in the gripping *Of Unknown Origin*.

SYNOPSIS: Home alone for the weekend, yuppie Bart Hughes (Weller) is confronted with strange noises in his fancy fixer-upper, a brownstone in Manhattan. He learns that an overly large rat has taken up residence on his real estate, and Bart becomes obsessed with the rodent, to the exclusion even of his job. He tries to kill the rat, but it's a no go. He attempts to poison the creature and then finds baby, realizing that the creature is a female. Growing desperate, Bart decides that only a cat can take care of a rat, but the giant rat kills the cat instead! The rat takes revenge, carving up Bart's home, cutting through the phone lines and generally destroying everything in sight, at least until Bart suits up (with a specially engineered rat-killing baseball bat) for the final battle.

COMMENTARY: *Of Unknown Origin* is a cleverly wrought man vs. animal horror as well as a fascinating comment on the modern “rat race.” The fast-paced film lands an anal, obsessive compulsive neatnik yuppie in bitter opposition with an outsized, seemingly diabolical rat (often revealed in close-up so as to make it appear huge). Both beings stake a claim on one prime piece of New York real estate, and neither is willing to admit defeat.

Consequently, this film introduces us to the best odd couple of the 1980s: Peter Weller vs. the rat. Weller plays Felix; the Rat—Oscar. But seriously, *Of Unknown Origin*, directed with flair by George Cosmatos, really sizzles. This brawny, imaginative venture even boasts the audacity to compare Weller's wealth-obsessed yuppie with Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, and view his rat nemesis as Bart's great white whale. It takes balls to compare a cheesy horror movie to classic literature, but *Of Unknown Origin* earns its stripes. In short, it's built a better mousetrap than most.



Bart Hughes (Peter Weller) finds his home and family menaced by oversized vermin in *Of Unknown Origin* (1983).

Weller is just your average 1980s yuppie, bucking for a promotion that could land him an extra twenty-five grand per year and a seat on the board. If he fails, it's back, he says to his wife, "to pinching pennies in Guatemala." Bart's given a new assignment concerning corporate re-organization and just two weeks to complete the complex job. Unfortunately, in his brownstone home the dish washer floods and other disasters occur with regularity.

And, it's all the fault of that damn rat.

If Weller's character is symbolically a rat trapped in a corporate and domestic cage, *Of Unknown Origin* spends an equal amount of time devoted to tracing the rat's background. There's a great dinner scene here in which Weller grosses out his fellow diners by providing snappy rat trivia. Did you know the little vermin can eat through lead *and* concrete? That they have teeth like chisels? That they're responsible for carrying the plague through Europe?

In a battle of wills, who will win? The human rat who inhabits a maze-like city and thoughtlessly rolls up an escalator every morning as though it's an exercise wheel? Or the literal rat, who hides in the vent and the sewers? When both creatures seek to plant the flag at

Bart's brownstone, the film answers that question of dominance in a sustained, pitched battle. It gets personal too. Like some vermin version of Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, the rat even steals away onto Weller's bed and in an invasion of his host's personal space destroys Bart's pillows, leaving only feathers in its wake.

As the war wages, the lovely brownstone is thoroughly trashed from top to bottom, and Bart becomes rather ratty in appearance himself: unkempt, unclean and ultimately unhinged. He begins spending his time not toiling on a corporate re-organization but rather engineering a rat-killing baseball bat. After the book *Moby Dick* (another tale of obsession) makes a guest appearance, and the rat chews the electrical wires, thereby cutting the power, *it's on*. The film's denouement is a wreck-o-rama, a derby of massive destruction.

Just remember: You must destroy a brownstone to save it, or something like that.

Every decade deserves a great rat movie. The 1970s had *Willard* (1971), and the 1980s had *Of Unknown Origin*. This is a terrific film.

One Dark Night

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Meg Tilly (Julie Wells); Melissa Newman (Olivia); Robin Evans (Carol); Leslie Speights (Kitty); Donald Hotton (Dockstader); Elizabeth Daily (Leslie); David Mason Daniels (Steve); Adam West (Allan); Leo Gorcery Jr. (Barlow); Larry Carroll (TV Reporter); Katee McClure (Female Reporter); Kevin Peter Hall (Eddie); Ted Lehman (Drunk); Nancy Mott (Lucy); Shandor (Russian Minister)

CREW: Comworld Pictures Inc. *Casting:* Eliza Bergeron. *Director of Photography:* Hal Trussell. *Production Designer:* Craig Stearns. *Film Editors:* Charles Tetoni, Michael Spence. *Music:* Bob Summers. *Makeup:* Randy Lowe. *Special Effects Designers:* Tom Burman, Ellis Burman, Bob Williams. *Executive Producer:* Thomas P. Johnson. *Producer:* Michael Schroeder. *Written by:* Thomas McLoughlin, Michael Hawes. *Directed by:* Thomas McLoughlin. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

P.O.V.

“We were done with *One Dark Night* prior to *Poltergeist*, but it got held

back and didn't hit movie theaters until January of '83. So by the time it came out, a number of reviewers said 'Here's a movie that's taken several ideas from *Poltergeist*!' That pissed us off, but we knew that was going to happen, because we knew Allen Daviau, who had shot *E.T.* He came into the editing room because he was friends with our DP. He saw the corpse footage and said, 'When are you guys coming out?' And we said, 'This summer.' And he said 'Good, because I just saw *Poltergeist* and there are a lot of similarities. You guys better get out there first.' We thought we would, but, of course, we didn't..."—Director Tom McLoughlin remembers *One Dark Night*'s bad timing.

SYNOPSIS: A famed Russian psychic named Ramar is discovered dead in his filthy apartment with the corpses of six young women stacked in his closet. At Ramar's funeral, his daughter Olivia (Newman) experiences strange visions and later learns from an occult magazine reporter that her father was apparently capable of telekinesis thanks to a talent known as "psychic vampirism." Meanwhile, high school student Julie Wells (Tilly) desperately hopes to join a gang called The Sisters and prepares for an initiation prepped by the sadistic Carol (Evans), who once dated Julie's boyfriend, Steve (Daniels). The challenge is to spend the entire night in a mausoleum alone. Unfortunately, this is the very night that Ramar has been entombed in the structure, and he is able to reach out from beyond the grave to touch the living in terrifying ways.

COMMENTARY: One of the earliest shots in Tom McLoughlin's impressive *One Dark Night* signals the scope of the horror to come. At the urban scene of a crime, a row of white coroner vans are lined up like a caravan. One after another—as though falling dominoes—the driver side doors open ... a harbinger of the virtual army of medical examiners needed to examine the scene of a strange crime. These well-staged images visually and subtly clue in the viewer: Something monstrous has occurred here. And indeed it has. Inside the building, "psychic vampire" Karl Ramar has stacked his victims' corpses in a closet. On the soundtrack, police radio information plays, discussing the killer and the crime scene.

In these opening moments, McLoughlin—a director with a firm grasp of both classic literature and horror as well as a high level of comfort speaking in those languages—uses imagery rather than heavy-handed dialogue to build a sense of all-encompassing terror. His staging and editing decisions throughout *One Dark Night* reveal a taste and intelligence that differentiates this low-budget horror from many brethren.

Although some of the material involving Ramar's daughter and her husband, played by Adam West, proves less than thrilling, once *One Dark Night* settles into its own unique rhythm, its own variation on the initiation–hell night ritual—an evening spent alone in a mausoleum this time—the film develops an interesting and increasingly pervasive sense of dread and terror. Which is rather amazing and impressive, since *One Dark Night*'s nemesis is never really depicted on screen, and nothing terribly horrific really happens on camera for a while. Instead, in the best tradition of the horror film, little things portend big things, and the presence of evil is suggested, but not paraded out for all to see.

One Dark Night's build-up, as Ramar's ill-psychic-wind blows through the mortuary, may be the most suspenseful portion of the film. Except for Meg Tilly's character, the other girls transgress badly, evidencing no respect for the dead, and this is just the kind of thing that must be punished. Meanwhile, unobserved, Ramar's power grows and grows...

A psychic vampire, a telekinetic corpse, as it were, makes for a fascinating and unique threat, especially original in the heyday of the slasher. Also revealing the director's enthusiasm for and understanding of mythology is the key to dispatching Ramar: It's a mirror, reflecting evil's energy back. Of course, this recalls Medusa and the method of destroying that snake-haired fiend in Greek myth.

After exhibiting so much restraint and sustained suspense, the film goes ball-to-the-walls in its finale, as Ramar animates the dead. They glide weirdly through the mortuary's silent, cold corridors and nearly bury the living. As they burst out of caskets, open their eyes, and are dragged towards their victims, these corpses provide an odd and disquieting menace. Not technically alive, they're pawns in Ramar's hands, and—as you would expect from a corpse—some of them are really decomposed. There's nice use of light and dark in various frames, and the film's final corpse pile-up is nauseating and—again—rather original in concept and execution.

Bolstered too by a good final girl in Meg Tilly, *One Dark Night* is one of those undiscovered eighties diamonds in the rough. It is rated PG, because there is almost no blood shown, and though deeply scary, it isn't particularly violent. This movie about necromancy is a quirky, almost retro-gem from a decade renowned for its more explicit, more graphic efforts. But the frisson built here isn't easily dismissed and some of the final scenes involving dead “weight” attacking the living is good, old-fashioned nightmare fodder.

CLOSE-UP: Making a Movie in a Mausoleum, *One Dark Night*

: Even before he began directing movies, Tom McLoughlin had an interesting screen career. He earned his SAG card working with Woody Allen on *Sleeper* (1983), and was nominated for an Emmy for his pantomime work on Dick Van Dyke's variety show. In the horror genre, McLoughlin got his start playing the mutated bear (in a 150-lb. suit) in John Frankenheimer's ill-fated *The Prophecy* (1979). Today, he belongs to the "Masters of Horror" group that Mick Garris united, which includes such talents as John Carpenter, Wes Craven, Eli Roth and Quentin Tarantino.

McLoughlin grew up loving the Universal classic horror movies and later, Hammer's efforts in the genre. "There was always a sense to me that horror should be gothic," the artist—a neo-classicist—suggests. "Like Edgar Allan Poe's work. It taps into something deep inside you."

"Where the inspiration for *One Dark Night* came from is that I was in France when I was nineteen, studying pantomime, dance, and physical comedy, and going to see movies every day. One of the things I did one Sunday afternoon was go down into the catacombs in Paris. It's wall-to-wall skulls and bones, from all the dead people—from centuries—that were put down there."

"You're given a candle and you're supposed to stay with the group," McLoughlin continues, "but I decided I was going to pull away from the group and just walk around down there by myself. It was the first time I ever felt psychological or supernatural fear. There was nothing there; there was nobody coming after me; but there was just something about knowing where I was and what I was surrounded by, that gave me a chill that was unforgettable."

"Cutting to years later. I wasn't having much success selling comedy screenplays because television was doing most of the comedy. What Hollywood was really looking for were horror movies. With *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* and *He Knows You're Alone* and all those killer horror movies, I decided with my friend Mike Hawes that we wanted to do one that went back to Edgar Allan Poe, Gothic horror style."

"So I pulled in that notion [from the catacombs experience], of what if you have to stay down there with wall-to-wall dead people. It's the whole idea of being trapped in a mausoleum, where you have all these clean marble walls, but behind them are rotted corpses. That was the early inspiration."

"Then we pulled into the old cliché idea of what if you pledged into a

club or a group or a sorority, and we decided to make the characters high school girls and went from there. We added something we were both interested in, which was psychic phenomenon and found out about this thing called *psychic vampirism*.

“So we merged these ideas together. What if the guy entombed there was also known as a psychic vampire and he would rob young girls of their energy, not their blood, and then use that energy to move and levitate thing and go further out into the realm of psychic phenomena?

“And we grounded a lot of it in psychic fact and science. We put these ideas together, which took about three or four years of taking the script around to studios and independents. Of course, I’d never directed anything. People said, ‘Well, this is really interesting, a bloodless horror movie. But no.’

All was not lost. “We found a group of Mormon investors in Utah. They needed a tax shelter. They were willing to give us a million dollars to make the movie—as long as we could start it in three weeks and have it air in the Bahamas three days after we shot it. So that’s what we did,” says McLoughlin. “I had lived that script for so many years and done story boards and stuff that it wasn’t that difficult to shift gears and start casting like crazy and put it together.”

Yet when it came to casting, McLoughlin found it necessary to modify his original intention in regards to the film’s heroine. “I wanted the classic beautiful blond geek girl who had a sense of innocence about her, and she was the one who was going to be tormented,” he relates. “After seeing a ton of people, including Sharon Stone and Dominique Dunne, in came this girl who came down from Canada, who was nineteen years old.

“In walked Meg Tilly, who at first glance I thought was Asian because of her eyes, and because her hair was in her face—and she had braces. And I thought, ‘Oh gosh, this is just not what I wanted.’ But she kicked back her hair and started doing my dialogue like nobody else. She made it work. She was the best that came in the door. So it was a no-brainer to say ‘Hire her! Great. Forget everything I said before about what I was looking for...’”

Adam West was cast too, and the former star of *Batman* (1966–68) was welcomed by McLoughlin. “That was an interesting challenge, mainly because Adam is one of the nicest and funniest guys you’ll ever meet.

“He’d spent so many years being Batman that his way of speaking as an actor was to literally start his voice high and bring it low. He would do his lines like that, and of course I was trying to get him to just do [the lines] normal. Not to put musicality into it, because it was just too unreal.

“He got that, he understood that, and was really terrific at that, and then when the movie left our hands and the producer who took over decided he wanted to re-cut the movie, they brought Adam into loop, and nobody corrected him. So in the movie, there is a lot of that musicality, which is the only thing that really bothered me. He was really terrific, but there was just this way he adopted to having his voice go when he was doing a part.”

The film’s special effects are still quite impressive, almost a quarter-century later.

“Tom Burman literally went into looking at real dead bodies. We found out later that some of the skeletons were real human skeletons in some of those rubber bodies. The crafting of the little girl and the bride and all that stuff? Tom had a lot of very young, very cool-thinking artists in there and they all went off on their own vision of what a dead person at different stages of decay would look like,” says McLoughlin.

“Tom also came up with the very cool idea of the war veteran. Half his face was rotted, but the other half was made of wax for the funeral. So there’s a point [in the movie] when one of the girls is trying to push off the corpse, and her hand goes *through* what looks like the good part of the face, which is the wax, and it’s more decayed and burnt than the other part was...

“There was a lot of wild imagination. We tossed in maggots and this green puss, so—once again—there wasn’t a drop of blood, but there were all these other gross elements. While we were doing it, we kept saying ‘More maggots!’ We had a girl kick one of the corpses, and her foot goes through its chest, and the audience just went nuts when they saw that.”

The corpses in the film aren’t merely convincing, many of them actually have to float (on the power of Ramar’s psychokinesis).

“We prided ourselves that this was not going to be walking dead, because you can’t top George Romero,” notes McLoughlin. “But you never saw floating corpses before. And if we had more money, they

would have floated even better. As it was, we had to do a lot of close shots of feet moving along the ground. It was all accomplished through the illusions of cuts. If we remade it today, we would find better ways. I'm not saying CGI, but you can move things and digitally paint out the wires and make things even more cool than we could with our little \$800,000 budget. We did the best we could with the restrictions."

One Dark Night was shot in twenty-eight days in Los Angeles, sometimes at sets, sometimes at a mausoleum. "In all those mausoleum scenes, Meg really got freaked out. She did not want to be in there, and she allowed all that fear to work, even though we went into a set for some of the special effects sequences. She still carried that same vibe with her that she had in the mausoleum. She raised the bar on the film," McLoughlin notes appreciatively.

"[The movie] wasn't her cup of tea, and two years later she was up for an Oscar for *Agnes of God*. It was a means to an end to be a lead in a motion picture, and like most good actors she just committed to the circumstances. There's not one person who was other than fun."

Unfortunately, the film was taken out of McLoughlin's hands and re-cut, and this meant—among other things—that his original ending was removed.

"There was a version of the movie that wasn't shown in the theaters, where there was this passing of Ramar's energies to the Meg Tilly character," he reveals. "In our original version, she turns and we actually used Nastassja Kinski's eyes from *Cat People*. There was this look that made them look dead and animal-like to give the audience this chill that it's not over. She's got whatever Ramar had in her now..."

"There was also a little twist with the other girls. You didn't know what happened to them [in this version], and the last shot of the movie was the camera moving to a nameless crypt, and you can hear them inside clawing and screaming. So it really ended on a very claustrophobic note."

After the film was released, *One Dark Night* made a long, slow slide into obscurity. "Once the investors had their tax shelter and it was released and did its run and things, the company basically declared bankruptcy and the movie just fell into the great abyss," says McLoughlin.

“Anybody who could get a-hold of a copy of it put their own title on it, and it was released everywhere. It was bootlegged quite a bit on the Internet, and then I started getting calls from fairly well-known Hollywood producers who had seen the film when they were eight or nine years old, and it had scared the hell out of them, and they always wanted to remake it. So, when I tried to find out who had the rights, it seemed like nobody did. The rights were forgotten about. It was literally kind of an item that anybody could have.”

Fortunately, this situation has been rectified and as of this writing (December 2005), *One Dark Night* had been released on DVD by Media Blasters. The company that owns it, Liberty International, got it as part of a large acquisition from a bank. According to McLoughlin, Liberty is interested in a remake of the film.

“I said, ‘I’d like to stay a part of it because obviously I didn’t know a whole lot when I did it the first time, and I’d loved to get a shot at it again.’”

Even though the film was unavailable to consumers after the HBO/Thorn EMI Betamax and VHS versions went out of print, *One Dark Night* has still resonated powerfully with those who’ve seen it over the years.

“Every time I do these horror conventions—and I’m usually talking about *Friday the 13th* because of the box set I did the commentary on—I might mention *One Dark Night* in passing, and suddenly three-fourths of the audience goes into thunderous applause,” the director notes with pride.

“And I say, ‘My God, you guys know this movie?’

“The greatest compliment I got was in the last week or two. I meet with this group called The Masters of Horror and there’s a whole bunch of us that have been getting together for dinners. It’s all the greats. John Carpenter, Wes Craven, John Landis and Tobe Hooper and on and on. And this last one had Eli Roth. Everybody is really great ... just good guys. Really supportive of one another. There’s no ego. It’s amazing. But two weeks ago, toward the end of the evening, in walks Quentin Tarantino. He’s got energy that’s just unbelievable.

“At the end of the evening, Quentin turned to me and said, ‘Man, *One Dark Night!* I saw it twice at the World Theater!’, which is like the Hollywood grindhouse we had years ago. ‘I’ve got the VHS of it!’ He even started going into the scenes that he remembered...”

Pieces

★★

Critical Reception

“Feminists have and will continue to attack this feature for its misogynist overtones, but truth be told, *Pieces* was probably made strictly for a prepubescent male audience looking for a little T & A with their gore. Fairly harmless, yet reckless and unruly, with seemingly no interest in cinematic quality or logic whatsoever.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher George (Inspector Bracken); Paul Smith (Willard); Edmund Purdom (Dean); Linda Day George (Mary Riggs); Ian Sera (Kendall); Jack Taylor (Professor Brown); Frank Bana (Sgt. Holden); Gerard Tichy (Dr. Jennings); Hilda Fuchs (Secretary); Isabelle Luque (Sylvia).

CREW: *Presented by:* Almena Film Productions. *Music:* Cam. *Director of Photography:* John Marine. *Screenplay:* Dick Randall, John Shadow. *Producers:* Dick Randall, Steve Minasian. *Director:* J. Piquer Simon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “It seems a maniac is running loose. Or something like that.”—A diligent journalist reports on the situation in *Pieces*.

SYNOPSIS: In 1942, a disturbed young boy murders his shrill mother with an axe when she refuses to let him finish assembling a sexually explicit jigsaw puzzle. Forty years later, a lunatic is killing university students with a chainsaw, and the police, including Inspector Bracken (George), are brought in to investigate at the behest of the dean (Purdom). Bracken makes one student, Kendall (Sera), his unofficial eyes and ears on the campus, and orders police woman, Mary Riggs (Day George) to infiltrate the university as the new tennis coach in hopes of outing the killer.

Among the suspects are Willard (Smith), a shifty, eye-rolling groundskeeper, and Professor Brown (Taylor), a pompous, prissy teacher of Comparative Anatomy. The killer murders more young coeds and starts to assemble his own human puzzle from the female

“pieces” he has collected with the help of his chainsaw. Mary draws close to the identity of the killer, but is drugged at the last minute, making her vulnerable to attack...

COMMENTARY: A mother’s refusal to let her son assemble a sexually explicit jigsaw puzzle results in a string of chainsaw murders on a college campus forty years later in *Pieces*, a ridiculous horror film packed with all the requisite ingredients of the slasher paradigm.

In addition to the deadly preamble, the film features several examples of useless authority, police officers unable to solve the crimes, as well as a string of red herrings like Professor Brown, who foolishly touches the chainsaw at one point, thus assuring that his fingerprints will be on the weapon. He doesn’t turn out to be the killer but is—*gasp*—a homosexual instead.

The common vices of 1980s horror (sex and weed) are also on display in this awkwardly dubbed, Spanish-made film. Its bizarre, unmotivated finale echoes *Maniac* (1980) and *Don’t Go in the House* (1980), seeing a corpse come to life, out of the blue. In this case, the “woman” the killer was assembling out of all those hacked-off pieces reaches out with a dead hand, and the movie ends on that confusing note.

No doubt, these frequently recruited components could be utilized in a decent slasher film, but *Pieces* is utterly absurd from start to finish. The chainsaw deaths are incredibly gory, and one death sequence is downright mean-spirited (revealing that a would-be victim has soiled her pants in terror). Many other touches feel inappropriate or baffling, and thus a *Mystery Science Theater 3000* narration, provided by the viewer, is a veritable necessity.

For instance, the death of a student in the campus swimming pool is so poorly staged that it elicits laughter. The killer grabs the girl (who has shimmied sexily out of her panties like a pro and jumped topless into the pool) with a net, of all things. She then lies there motionless beside the pool, while the murderer steps away, grabs the chainsaw and returns to kill her. This victim never moves during this time, and doesn’t scream until the last second, essentially a lamb being slaughtered. Since her life is jeopardized, one would think she *might* fight back, but that kind of staging was apparently too complicated for the director to master. What many slasher films have failed to learn is that the primary thrill inherent in these films is the chase—the final girl fighting back against a seemingly omnipotent opponent. If the victims don’t put up a fight, the movies aren’t particularly enjoyable,

let alone scary.

Another baffling moment occurs when Mary Riggs (Lynda Day George) patrols the college campus by night. Out of the blue, a young Asian man who looks like Bruce Lee jumps out to accost her. Why? “Bad chop suey,” he jokes, and then runs off, never to be seen again. This bizarre interlude remains unexplained to this day.

Then there’s the moment when Mary discovers the death of a student she cares deeply for and shouts—at the top of her lungs—the word “Bastard” three times. It’s a hysterical line reading to be certain, just begging to be mocked.

Other moments also provoke guffaws and gasps, including the scene wherein the killer sidles into the elevator with a would-be victim, and the chainsaw is casually “hidden” behind his back. Like the victim won’t notice it!

Finally, there’s the shot of Mary Riggs’ office at the police station, with a map of the entire United States plastered prominently on the wall, just so viewers won’t think the film was produced in Madrid. Also amusing is the fact that forty years after the crime that inspires these brutal murders, the blood on Mom’s clothes remains bright red, not rusty brown, as one would expect.

The psychology of *Pieces*, if you can call it that, is primitive in the extreme, the typical horror movie canard about sex and violence comingling in puberty. A little boy is stopped from expressing his sexuality by his shrewish mother, and responds by taking an axe to her head. The incident is bloody in the extreme, and indicates a deeply disturbed mind. But one has to wonder about the dean (the killer). If he’s so unstable that a rebuke from Mamma sends him over the edge of sanity, then why does he wait forty years to kill again? *Pieces* is such a bad movie that it doesn’t even explain why the dean (Purdom) is killing again now, after all this time. What set him off?

The real answer to that question, is that the makers of *Pieces* must have seen *Friday the 13th*...

***Piranha Part 2: The Spawning* (a.k.a. *Piranha 2: Flying Killers*)**

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Steve Kimbraugh); Tricia O'Neil (Anne); Steve Marachuk (Tyler); Ted Richert (Raoul); Ricky G. Paull (Chris); Leslie Graves (Allison); Albert Sanders (Leo); Phil Colby (Ralph); Carole Davis (Jai); Anne Pollack (Mrs. Wilson); Lee Krug (Ron); Captain Kidd Brewer (Lou); Ancil Gloudon (Gabby); Tracy Berg (Beverly); Hildy Magnasun (Myrna); Connie Lynn Hadden (Loretta); Arnie Ross (Mal); Sally Ricca (Cindy); Ward White (Dumont); Paul Drummond (Frank); Dorothy Cunningham (April).

CREW: *Presented by*: Ovidio G. Assonitis. *Film Editor*: Robert Silvi. *Music*: Steve Powder. *Special Effects Designer*: Giannetto De Rossi. *Director of Photography*: Roberto D'Ettore Piazzoli. *Production Manager*: Umberto Sambuco. *Executive in Charge of Production*: Peter Shepherd. *Produced by*: Chako Van Leuwen, Chako Film Company, Jeff Schechtman. *Executive Producer*: Ovidio Assonitis. *Screenplay*: H.A. Milton. *Directed by*: James Cameron and (uncredited) Ovidio Assonitis. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: “The bastards fly!”—An exclamation from *Piranha 2*.

SYNOPSIS: In the Caribbean resort town of Elysium, murderous, flying piranha—the result of a U.S. genetic experiment gone horribly wrong—murder two divers in instructor Anne Kimbrauh's (O'Neil) diving class. She teams with her estranged husband, Sheriff Steve Kimbraugh (Henriksen), and bio-chemist—government operative Tyler Sherman (Marachuk) to stop the flying fish, but resort owner Raoul (Richert) wants to keep the resort open for a popular fish fry celebration. The party is marred when flying piranha launch themselves from the surf and devour the party-goers. Too late, Anne and Steve realize their son Chris (Paull) is out on the ocean with a girlfriend, and therefore in danger. While Steve pilots a helicopter to find Chris, Anne and Tyler dive to the wreck of a U.S. boat—believed to be the home base of the deadly fish—and plant dynamite charges to destroy it. Only one of them will survive.

COMMENTARY: Here's a cockamamie fish story. *Piranha 2* should have been as much exploitative fun as Joe Dante's original film, released in 1978. A young, pre-“King of the World” James Cameron was assigned to the director's chair, and Lance Henriksen was cast in a lead role.

But somewhere along the way, the catch wriggled off the hook. Call it a terminal case of “ass-onitis” because producer Ovidio G. Assonitis reportedly fired the young wunderkind Cameron over differences in creative vision, and the result is a film that, unlike the flying killers of

the title, fails to take off.

Perhaps it was just the decade. The 1980s simply was *not* the decade for killer fish movies, and if one gazes across some representative titles, a murky picture emerges. *Blood Tide?* *Jaws 3-D?* *Jaws the Revenge?* *Piranha 2?* *Devil Fish?* A fish rots from the head down, as Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis stated in 1988 (when discussing whether or not Ronald Reagan was responsible for the governmental failures of the decade) and indeed, if even the Rolls Royce of fish attack movies—the *Jaws* series—stinks to high heaven in the greed-is-good decade, how can one expect the second-rate fare to be anything but chum?

Not that *Piranha 2* is flat-out terrible. There's something irresistible about the idea and execution of the titular creatures. These flying fish are so bulky, their mouths so laden with oversized fangs, that it seems like an aerodynamic impossibility that they could take flight, even with those awkward, flapping, leathery wings. The design is amusing by itself, though it's hard to tell if this was intentional or not.

It's also more than a little bit rewarding to watch as the piranha turn the table on the hungry, generally unlikable tourists attending a fish fry. The party-goers all think that fish is on the menu, but the tables have been turned and it is they who are served up. The fish attack and literally go for the jugular.

And who can't admire a scene (especially given Cameron's involvement in *Aliens* [1986]) wherein a toothy piranha leaps, chest-burster-style, from the torso of a corpse? This film even has the good sense of continuity to reference the original *Piranha* and the Vietnam War era experiment that resulted in the creation of the genetically engineered killing machines in the first place.

The real rap against the film is that, unlike its progenitor, it is dull, and seems to have very little sense of humor about itself. Situational logic is a stumbling block in the climax—as it is in *Jaws: The Revenge*—when Henriksen's character ditches his helicopter and jumps into the sea to board an imperiled boat. What is it with these movies pilots ditching perfectly flight-worthy escape vehicles and trading them for ships at sea, ones which are vulnerable to the monsters on hand? Of course, these piranha can fly too, but still, if there are evil fish swimming about, give me the helicopter over a boat any day. Especially if dynamite charges are set to go off soon. I'll radio for help. I promise.

Psycho II

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[S]tructurally and stylistically, the film holds the attention throughout most of its length and it does have the good sense to dole out its graphic splatter in carefully measured doses ... [It] builds its violence, if not suspense, until the whole thing erupts into a rather likable, but slightly silly bloodbath.”—Ken Hanke, *A Critical Guide to Horror Film Series*, Garland Publishing Inc., 1991, page 229.

“This is not a classic in the way that *Psycho* was. But give it credit. It captures much of the mood of the original, Anthony Perkins stepped back into Norman’s shoes like he’d never left, and the filmmakers had the guts to make this a murder mystery, just like *Psycho*! The surprise ending was a little forced, but the fact that Norman really isn’t up to no good for much of the film brilliantly manipulated our expectations, and for that, it deserves high credit. This film could have been terrible, and it wasn’t, and for that, we should be grateful. Gus Van Sant, leave this film alone.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anthony Perkins (Norman Bates); Vera Miles (Lila Loomis); Robert Loggia (Dr. Bill Raymond); Meg Tilly (Mary Samuels/Mary Loomis); Dennis Franz (Warren Toomey); Hugh Gillin (Sheriff John Hunt); Robert Alan Browne (Statler); Claudia Bryar (Ms. Emma Spool); Ben Hartigan (Judge); Lee Garlington (Myrna); Tim Maier (Josh); Jill Carroll (Kim); Chris Hendrie (Deputy Pool); Tom Holland (Deputy Norris); Michael Lomazow (District Attorney); Robert Destri (Public Defender); Osgood Perkins (Young Norman); Gene Whittington (Diver); Robert Traynor (Desk Clerk).

CREW: Universal Pictures and Oak Industries Present a Bernard Schwartz Production of a Richard Franklin Film. *Casting:* Jackie McNamara. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Special Visual Effects:* Albert Whitlock. *Film Editor:* Andrew London. *Production Designer:* John W. Corso. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Executive Producer:* Bernard Schwartz. *Written by:* Tom Holland. *Based on characters created by:* Robert Bloch. *Produced by:* Hilton A. Green. *Directed by:* Richard Franklin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 113 minutes.

“First time he [Anthony Perkins] came up those stairs, I had an eerie feeling—like we were being watched.”—Director Richard Franklin describes shooting *Psycho II* and working with screen legend Perkins in the role of Norman Bates.

INCANTATION: “Our courts protect the criminals, not their victims!”—Lila Loomis (Vera Miles) complains bitterly about the release of psycho killer Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in the long-awaited sequel to Hitchcock’s masterpiece, *Psycho*.

SYNOPSIS: After twenty-two years in an asylum, mass murderer Norman Bates (Perkins) is judged “restored to sanity” and released, over the objections of Lila Loomis (Miles), a woman who survived his earlier killing spree and whose sister, Marion Crane, was killed by Bates. Norman returns to the Bates Motel under the care of Dr. Raymond (Loggia) and gets a job as a short order cook at a local diner. He befriends a young co-worker named Mary (Tilly), unaware that she is Lila’s daughter and conspiring with her mother to drive Norman insane. Mary and Lila begin to dress up as Norman’s deceased mother, leave him notes in his mother’s hand, and even start placing telephone calls as his mother to stir up his old ways and return him to the asylum. Somewhere along the way Mary starts to feel sorry for the boyish, gullible Norman, and stops working with Lila. Oddly, a series of killings begin and Norman starts to talk about the identity of the murderer. He claims that it’s his *real* mother doing the killing...

COMMENTARY: It isn’t easy crafting a sequel to one of the greatest film titles of all time, but Richard Franklin is up to the task in *Psycho II*, a great film on its own merits, and one that also honors both the *Psycho* legacy and that of its larger-than-life director, Alfred Hitchcock.

Where *Psycho* attempted to misdirect and shock audiences with a variety of narrative innovations (including the death of a lead character), *Psycho II* adopts a different strategy. Though it also boasts more than its fair share of surprises, *Psycho II* is also admirably frank and sincere about its lead characters. In other words, it doesn’t resort to any gimmicky stunts in order to reference *Psycho*, like killing a hero one-third of the way in.



Robert Loggia, director Richard Franklin and Anthony Perkins rehearse a scene for *Psycho II*, with the menacing Bates house in the background.

Much more daringly, *Psycho II* depicts Norman Bates in human, realistic terms. This approach is a strong contrast to the overriding tendency in the age of the slasher to make villains faceless monsters.

Franklin's insistence on making this film something of a character piece grants the most famous of serial killers a greater dimensionality than he evidenced even in the original.

Sympathy for the devil?

Perhaps, yet Norman's inherent innocence and even sense of decency transmits so powerfully in this movie. In part this is because of Anthony Perkins' sensitive performance. In part the feeling of melancholy arises from the Jerry Goldsmith score. However the emotion is engendered, it's undeniable that the audience actually gets mad at those who threaten Norman, namely Lila. Of course, it's not as though Norman is innocent of his crimes (though he is innocent, or rather naive in another way). Yet strangely audience sympathy rests with Bates throughout every twist and turn. This sympathy is borne out in scenes in which Norman plays the piano (and some anxious and depressed music). His soul is exposed as a lonely, tragic one here. And that's a little more than *Psycho* achieved.

Lest this sound like a bore, *Psycho II* also boasts a self-reflexive sense of humor that makes the movie tremendous fun, and also calls attention back to the elements of *Psycho*. The peephole in the wall, the shower, Mother's presence, and the swamp where Norman takes his victims are all resurrected but re-ordered in *Psycho II* to carry new meaning as well resonances of the old ones.

The film also tap-dances on the knife's edge of unbearable suspense. For instance, when asked by Mary if he keeps a knife in the kitchen, Norman hesitates for just a beat. "I'm afraid. ... not," he diffidently replies. Mary finds the knife for herself and slaps it in Norman's hand so he can cut a cheese sandwich.

Franklin's camera watches as Norman very slowly cuts the sandwich ... and then promptly loses his appetite. This scene is tense but also funny because Norman knows Mary is playing with fire, the audience knows Mary is playing with fire, and Mary knows it too. But each character is pretending it's okay.



A desperate Norman Bates (Perkins) is trapped in the attic while a murder occurs in the basement of the Bates house. From *Psycho II*.

The movie employs this kind of uncertainty throughout. Driven to the

edge by Lila and Mary, Norman could flip at any moment, so his presence keeps things unpredictable. Norman could become a killer, or could remain sane, but he always seems dangerously near the tipping point. As an indicator of his increasing proximity to madness, Norman subtly begins to refer to his mother in the present tense again. That's not a good sign...

Finally, *Psycho II* makes an interesting point about what precisely constitutes a crime. Norman was mentally ill when he committed murder and injured other parties. According to the law, he has served out his sentence and is now a free man. Lila, a 1980s vigilante (see: *Ms. 45* [1981]), refuses to accept the law. She complains that it protects the criminal, not their victims, and then takes matters into her own hands. Lila even corrupts Mary, her own flesh and blood, thus proving she's a bizarre reflection of Norman's cruel mother. Both Norman and Mary are like "lost" children, without tender mother figures, and so it is Lila who seems worse in this film than Norman herself. Her only excuse for breaking the law is revenge. She pays for her trespass with a knife through the mouth.



She smells like toasted cheese sandwiches. Norman Bates (Perkins) shares a tender moment with Mary Loomis (Meg Tilly), in Richard Franklin's sequel to *Psycho*.

Brimming with double crosses, secret identities, and gory death sequences, *Psycho II* flies highest when Anthony Perkins holds center

stage. By turns boyish, gullible and confused, he gives a compassionate, heartfelt performance. In a world where horror films were becoming increasingly de-humanized and violent, *Psycho II* asks us to consider a killer as a little lost boy, one who never really had a life.

As *Psycho II* ends, and Norman strides outside his house, clouds roiling above, Mother stationed at her window perch, and the vacancy sign lit, the impression is not so much that Norman is up to his old tricks again. Rather, society's refusal to accept and heal Bates is at fault. This failing is seen in Lila's cruel machinations, and in the fact that government cutbacks have prevented a social worker from dropping by to check on him. This is seen in Toomey's evil mocking of Norman, and in the sheriff's suspicion of Norman. Is it no wonder that Norman wants no part of sanity? Or that he has retreated to the only love he ever knew? It's a flawed love his mother provides, but love nevertheless.

"I'm the only one who loves you," she tells Norman in a tone both comforting and foreboding. "Only your mother truly loves you..."

CLOSE-UP: Back to the Bates Motel with Richard Franklin: Richard Franklin met Alfred Hitchcock as a teenager. "I was nineteen, so it would be immodest to claim to be a friend. I had, however, been a member of his fan club since my early teens," explains the director, "and Pat Hitchcock would one day tell me she used to lick the stamps to send the letters to me."

When Franklin first learned he had been selected to direct a follow-up to Hitchcock's *Psycho*, perhaps the finest horror film ever made, the news must have been an extraordinary high. I asked the director how the assignment came about.

"A phone call from Bernie Schwartz telling me that they were considering the idea, but didn't like Bloch's novel. A spec trip to the States when my agent said it would never happen (there were other projects in the wind). A meeting with Universal's cable division (it was originally only to be a cable movie), then with Hilton Green, who was generous to a fault.

"Being asked to screen *Patrick*, then signed to pick a writer and develop what was essentially my idea. The euphoria when I got the idea of bringing Mother back. (I woke in a rented house in the hills from a dream of someone dressed as Mother descending the stairs, and Norman transfixed and transformed.)

“The disappointment when Tony Perkins’s agent said he’d never do it —then guessing (correctly) it was a bluff. I never considered it wouldn’t happen, and I think this ‘confidence of ignorance’ (as Orson Welles called it, re: *Citizen Kane*) was probably what gave the whole thing such momentum. By the time we held the first preview, there was real buzz all over the studio.

“The real high,” he continues, “was the preview in New York City. I went with Andrew Sarris. Tony’s friend Steve Sondheim attended. There was a five story billboard in Times Square...”

Gus Van Sant caught tremendous flack for remaking *Psycho* in 1998; many in the industry back in the 1980s also felt uncertain about the wisdom of crafting a sequel like *Psycho II*. Given this attitude, I wondered if there was a moment when Franklin realized he would be the target for negative press.

“Only when the figures started to drop,” he notes. “I went from being ‘the bravest man in Hollywood’ to ‘well, anyone could have done that.’ And as my lawyer predicted, Hitchcock got all the credit (even though the two other sequels are sequels to our picture, not the original).”

Going back a bit, I asked Mr. Franklin about the stars of his film, and what was like working, in essence, with Hitchcock’s cast.

“[Perkins] was very generous (since he was angling to direct it,” Franklin notes. “[He was] an intellectual. I had to use a thesaurus to find the right adverb or adjective for what I wanted.

“[Vera Miles was] a powerhouse. One of the most forceful actors I’ve ever been on set with. I pumped her for stories about Ford (and Hitchcock). Her speech in the courtroom scene was almost verbatim what she said when I told her our premise.”

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is that Norman Bates is treated with sympathy and humanity, an unexpected touch in the age of Michael, Jason and Freddy. As Franklin notes, this was indeed his intent:

“Jerry Goldsmith’s first main theme was melancholy and I persuaded him to go with something more innocent. The music he’d written for the stairway flashback.... I played it to Tony and he cried. Said he’d lived with Norman all those years and no one else had ever understood his innocence—‘the boy man’ as Tony called him. Consider for example, he would be a virgin.”

Finally, I wondered if Franklin had gone into the making of the movie with a strategy to win over the cynics and critics, who just had to be gunning for him.

“The plan was to be so surprising as to disarm,” he suggests. “To have a plot so dense they couldn’t second guess us and got sucked in.

“It worked.”

Seven Doors of Death

(a.k.a. *The Beyond*)

★ ½

Critical Reception

“Fulci’s third zombie foray (following *Zombie* and *Gates of Hell*), a dark and lyric atmosphere-piece, is the most artistic, if not the most exciting, of Fulci’s series ... slow-paced and heavily burdened with its recurring, poorly explained images, *The Beyond* suffocates under the weight of its own grandeur.”—Peter Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, McFarland and Company, 2000, page 23.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Katherine MacColl (Liza); David Warbeck (Dr. John McCabe); Sarah Keller (Emily); Antoine St. John (Sweik); Veronica Lazar (Martha); Anthony Flees (Larry); Giovanni de Nava (Joe); Al Cliver (Dr. Harris); Michele Mirabella (Avery); Giampaolo Saccarola (Arthur); Maria pia Marsala (Jill); Laura de Marchi (Mary Ann).

CREW: A Rolling Thunder Picture, Grindhouse Release. *Story:* Dardano Sacchetti. *Screenplay:* Dardano Sacchetti, Giorgio Mariuzzi, Lucio Fulci. *Designs and Costumes:* Massimo Lentini. *Special Effects and Makeup created by:* Gianetti de Rossi. *Film Editor:* Vincenzo Tomassi. *Director of Photography:* Sergio Salvati. *Music:* Fabio Frizzi. *Produced by:* Fabrizio de Angelis. *Stunt Coordinator:* Nazzareneo Cardinali. *Special Effects:* Germano Natali. *Directed by:* Lucio Fulci. *MPAA Rating:* Not available. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You have *carte blanche*, but not a blank check, okay?”—Liza (MacColl) makes a baffling remark to her decorator in the baffling Lucio Fulci anti-classic, *The Beyond*.

SYNOPSIS: At a hotel in Louisiana in 1927, a blind painter named

Sweik (Saint John) in Room 237 is crucified (and melted with quicklime) by angry locals as an “ungodly warlock” for his knowledge of the prophecies of Eibon, which suggest that the hotel is constructed over one of the seven dreaded Gateways to Hell. In 1981, a single woman named Liza (MacColl) has moved from New York and inherited the hotel. During renovations, she is warned by a blind woman named Emily (Keller) that she must leave immediately. Liza ignores the warning. Her plumber, Joe (De Nava), dies horribly when he finds Sweik’s animated body in the basement. Dr. McCabe (Warbeck) attempts to help Liza deal with odd goings-on, and finds the book of Eibon in Emily’s deserted house. Liza and McCabe run a gauntlet of zombies in the local hospital (including those of Joe and Liza’s other murdered help) to reach the gateway to Hell, but once there, are rendered blind...

COMMENTARY: There are highly respected film scholars and aficionados in the world who laud the late Lucio Fulci’s dread-filled—though utterly incoherent—*The Beyond* as a genre masterpiece. To each his own, of course, but the French believe Jerry Lewis is a comedic genius, so there’s no accounting for taste...

In the 1980s, Lucio Fulci directed several horror films, and except for *New York Ripper*, they’re each better than the baffling *The Beyond*, a hodgepodge of mismatched story ideas vetted in lethargic, lugubrious fashion. Contrarily, *The House by the Cemetery* is some kind of twisted, perverse inspiration, and *Gates of Hell* is decent, if also baffling. But *The Beyond*? Fulci’s masterpiece? This film, released in America in 1983 under the title *Seven Doors of Death*, doesn’t really fit the bill.

As is his wont, Fulci marshals his resources and creates some utterly hypnotic horror sequences. The imagery that closes the film, of the protagonists rendered blind on the wasted landscape of Hell’s door, is simply unforgettable, and will be scorched into your psyche. *The Beyond* features many moments like that, including a memorable spectral encounter on a highway, but Fulci’s problem is always and forever that he just can’t be bothered to tell a story that actually makes sense. His characters are scripted so lazily that they seem to follow an alternate set of rules which I term “anti-logic.” They never do or say what real people would do or say given a situation such as those portrayed in his films, and thus never achieve the critical quality of verisimilitude.

Our heroine, Liza, for instance, evidences absolutely no reaction (at least not that the audience sees) to the news that Joe the plumber has been murdered in her basement, and that a creepy corpse was also

found there. One might think this would rattle her, or she would express sympathy. But *The Beyond* doesn't remember to let the character do that.

In broad strokes, *The Beyond*'s story is another example of that often workable cliché, the single woman in jeopardy. In this storyline, a tough, perky woman inherits a haunted house, faces a supernatural terror, and must deal with the ramifications of that discovery, essentially by herself. The single woman, a champion, thus learns self-reliance and independence in a "man's world." This is a workable template for a horror film, but the problem with *The Beyond* is that Liza never captures the audience's sympathy. We don't root for her because she's weird, and we don't understand what she knows, or when she understands it.

The film's other flaws are twofold. The first is that the characters' actions don't make sense, and on occasion are even infuriating. And secondly, the film is unintentionally hilarious in its use of the English language and its depiction of Italian-Southerners in Louisiana.

Fulci's penchant for gore is admirable if one appreciates that material, and this film also features a woman's face being melted off by acid, just for good measure. However what does it all mean and how is it significant? And why don't the characters behave by any consistent sense of logic or reality? Fulci's films may be dread-filled excursions into surrealism and dream imagery, but in the real world, they don't hang together, and *The Beyond* is Exhibit A.

LEGACY: An unexpurgated version of *The Beyond* was revivified by indie giant Quentin Tarantino in 1998 and did respectable business on the midnight movie circuit. Still, the movie didn't achieve the critical appreciation many Fulci scholars hoped.

Sleepaway Camp

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"*Sleepaway Camp* has to be one of the most deliberate attempts at cashing-in on the 1980s slasher craze. A rotten script, rotten directing and rotten acting are all lazily slap-dashed together with some lousy special effects and a sub-par Heavy Metal soundtrack to make one helluva crappy time. Honestly, however misguided and clichéd this film is, the surprise ending will be a shocker for even the most

seasoned viewer of this sort of genre drivel.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mike Kellin (Mel); Katherine Kamhi (Meg); Paul De Angelo (Ronnie); Jonathan Tierston (Ricky); Felissa Rose (Angela); Karen Fields (Judy); Christopher Collet (Paul); Desiree Gould (Aunt Martha); Owen Hughes (Artie); Robert Earl Jones (Ben); Susan Glaze (Sudie); Frank Trent Saladino (Gene); Rick Edrich (Jeff); Alan Breton (Frank the Cop); Dan Tursi (John); James Paradise (Lenny); Tom Van Dell (Mike); John Dunn (Kenny); Willy Kuskin (Mozart); Mike Mahon (Mel); Fred Greene (Eddie); Carol Robinson (Dolores); Brad Frankel (Joey).

CREW: An American Eagle Films Corp. Production. *Casting:* Michele Tatosian. *Production Designer:* William Billowit. *Film Editors:* Ron Kalish, Sharyn L. Ross. *Executive Producer:* Robert Hiltzik. *Producers:* Michele Tatosian, Jerry Silva. *Music:* Edward Bilous. *Director of Photography:* Benjamin Davis. *Makeup Illusions:* Edward French. *Special Mechanical Effects:* Ed Fountain. *Stunt Coordinator:* Cliff Cudney. *Written and Directed by:* Robert Hiltzik. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running Time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Young Angela (Rose), who endured a boating trauma on an idyllic lake in childhood, attends rustic Camp Arrawak for the summer. Angela doesn’t talk much, and this makes her an object of ridicule for the other girls. One day, after a meal, the camp chef and resident pervert, Artie (Hughes), comes on to Angela in a foul way, and promptly pays the price for his trespass. He is found later—his body scalped and boiled—after being dumped in a giant stew pot. The next day, a boy camper who teased Angela also suffers when his boat mysteriously capsizes and the accomplished young swimmer drowns. One by one, Angela’s other enemies begin to die off, and soon those around her begin to suspect her of committing murder. But they have a big surprise coming to them about shy, demure Angela.

COMMENTARY: *Sleepaway Camp* is *The Crying Game* (1994) of the slasher set. Overall, the movie is an unwelcome return trip to dreary Slasher-ville, a soggy bowl of warmed-over clichés brimming with all the ingredients one has come to expect in the formula. None of this material is particularly impressive in this permutation.

However, if any movie has ever been redeemed in its last five minutes,

Sleepaway Camp is that rarity. The final sequence simply must be seen to be believed. The climax is so legitimately shocking that it rocks the viewer back on his heels. It actually achieves something one might have considered impossible. It makes you want to watch the movie again.

But before that rally at the denouement, *Sleepaway Camp* meanders through a typical slasher equation, with the summer camp as its organizing principle. Already, that's problematic, since the summer camp has been the organizing principle of *Friday the 13th*, *Friday the 13th Part II*, *Madman*, and *The Burning* to name but a few. Still, *Sleepaway Camp* resorts to the summer camp as its setting, and this gives the film an awfully familiar victim base that includes counselors, young (and inevitably horny) campers, and even camp employees.

On the latter front, an especially unsavory character named Artie, the camp cook, leers at the newly arrived kids and compares them to chickens. He says that they're "never too young," and later tries to get Angela to give him a blow job. Since she's under-age, he's officially a child molester. Artie pays for his transgression: He's knocked into a giant silver pot of boiling water. He's scalded from head-to-toe, a horrendous—but wholly deserved—fate.

The deadly preamble that opens *Sleepaway Camp* is a boating accident, and the remainder of the film involves plenty of P.O.V. stalking shots which keep the killer's identity a secret. Kids misbehave regularly; "vice precedes slice and dice," in this case there's smoking weed and sex to contend with. The red herring is Ricky, and the *coup de grâce* is a murder by curling iron, though it's left to the audience's imagination to determine where, precisely, the instrument makes contact with human flesh.

If you're thinking you've seen and heard all this before, you're right. *Sleepaway Camp* offers precious little originality through most of its running time, and more to the point, teeters back and forth between being over-the-top, camp (particularly in regards to a horrid, show-stopping performance by the actress playing Angela's aunt) and a kitchen-sink "naturalism" during the camp scenes that's so realistic, unpretentious and untheatrical that the scenes play out as though we're watching grass grow.

But then, the *piece de resistance* is that ending. It occurs on the shore, water lapping in the background. Someone approaches Angela, who is clutching something. Angela is nude. And then Angela turns around...

Stop reading this review now, if you don't want to know more.

Angela is clutching the decapitated head of a would-be boyfriend that she's murdered. Why? Well, when Angela turns around, the camera reveals—in a full body shot—that Angela ain't no lady. She's a man! Then, a clearly deranged Angela stares crazy-eyed at the camera and growls-bellows, and before you can shout “What the hell?!?” the movie's over.

So, here's the lowdown on Angela. The little girl didn't survive the boating accident, only the little boy did. But the evil aunt already had a boy child, and didn't want another, so she made Angela dress and act like a girl. The reason Angela has been killing people is to avoid going into the shower, and so forth, so as not to reveal the truth. Every time a boy comes on to her or wants to date her, she's confronted with the agony of her sexual confusion.

It may just be the most audacious, incredible—and downright shocking—“sting in the tale/tail” in slasher history. Go back and watch a second time with the knowledge of Angela's true nature, and what you'll find is that the film is more carefully crafted than you had believed originally. That's why the film earns two and a half stars.

Sole Survivor

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anita Skinner (Denise Watson); Kurt Johnson (Brian Richardson); Robin Davidson (Kristy Cutler); Caren Larkey (Karla Davis); Andrew Boyer (Blake); Laurie Wendorf (Blake's Wife); Jennifer Sullivan (Girl on Loading Dock); Wendy Drake (Roxie); Susan Malter (Rita); Lloyd Stevens (Old Man in Park); Clay Wilcox (Randy); Brinke Stevens (Jennifer); Deaniel Cartmell (Lt. Peterson); William Snare (Artie); Steve Isbell (Cabbie).

CREW: A Robert D. & Caren L. Larkey Production, a Thom Eberhardt film. *Executive Producer:* Sal Romeo. *Producer:* Don Barkemeyer. *Director of Photography:* Russ Carpenter. *Music:* David E. Anthony. *Film Editor:* Thom Eberhardt. *Producer:* Don Barkemeyer. *Written and Directed by:* Thom Eberhardt. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

P.O.V.

“For a while I was even forbidden to speak of it [*Sole Survivor*] by my agent. Now, twenty-five years later, I can look back at it and laugh...”—Director Thom Eberhardt discusses *Sole Survivor*.

INCANTATION: “The karma’s so thick around here, you could cut it with a butter knife.”—Stating the obvious in Thom Eberhardt’s low-budget *Sole Survivor*.

SYNOPSIS: A washed-up movie star named Karla Davis (Larkey) awakens in the middle of the night after dreaming that the director of an upcoming TV commercial, Denise Watson (Skinner), will be the sole survivor of a plane crash. Her vision comes true: Watson alone makes it out of the disaster, and recuperates in the hospital (where she befriends a doctor, Brian Richardson [Johnson]). On the day of her release, Denise begins experiencing strange visions of her own, of pale-skinned, blank-eyed dead people, like a little girl (Sullivan) standing on a loading dock. This incident recurs with another stranger in the park, and on and on, until Denise becomes convinced that death is stalking her; that somehow, it is trying to make right the mistake of allowing her to survive. Before long, the blank-eyed dead people become more aggressive, attacking Denise’s young friend Kristy Culter (Robin) in her home. Meanwhile, an out-of-work and temperamental Karla commits suicide ... only to come back as one of the undead assailants.

COMMENTARY: Thom Eberhardt’s *Sole Survivor* is one film that its director would rather forget, a low-budget venture from what the helmer considers “the Ed Wood school of filmmaking.” But you know, given an objective viewing in the twenty-first century ... the film ain’t half bad.

Sole Survivor recounts the macabre tale of miracle woman Denise Watson, who comes to believe that death is a tangible force stalking her. Her doctor friend, Brian, tries to write off this feeling as nothing more than “survivors guilt,” and then provides frightening statistics about those who survive calamity. Most survivors, he reveals, die themselves within twenty-four months ... sometimes of suicide, sometimes ... *maybe not*.

“They just get careless ... maybe they go places where they subconsciously know they’re in danger,” the doctor suggests.

Of course, by the time of this chilling, creepy explanation—as fans of horror—we understand there’s obviously something much deeper and much more sinister going on here.

“There’s something in the air,” Denise notes with a chilling accuracy. “A feeling I’m going to get caught ... waiting for the axe to fall.” Thus the movie makes one wonder, are survivors of disasters like mine collapses and plane wrecks really just doomed to die? Does fate catch up with them later rather than sooner?

This sounds an awful lot like a familiar plot line from another movie. Well, it should. Virtually the same plot, involving a plane crash and a group of survivors, was at the core of the popular 2000 horror film, *Final Destination*. Of course, *Final Destination* is a big-budget extravaganza boasting A-list WB-style performers and expensive, elaborate special effects sequences. *Sole Survivor* is merely ... low-budget.

And yet, it’s marvelous how sometimes a low budget can create a frisson and energy all its own. What works well in *Sole Survivor* is not the simple “ghoul” makeup on the undead sentinels, or even their periodic attacks, but rather their scary and unnerving demeanor. These dead sirens stand alone, often appearing in the frame only in long shot, and seem paralyzed, frozen. They don’t speak, don’t gesture ... they just stand there ... watching, and waiting, a profile in stillness.

The girl on the loading dock—a drowning victim—drips water onto the floor during her sequence, but otherwise remains still in the distance, as if she isn’t really there. Later, Denise spies one of these ghoulish “eyes of the dead” glaring at her as she eats dinner in a restaurant. Again depicted in long shot, the figure just stands motionless, as if made of stone, watching from a distance. And nobody else seems to notice.

I’m reminded of why the early portions of *Child’s Play* (1988) remain so effective: It’s the anticipation, stupid. Sometimes, inanimate things are more frightening when still than when they shriek and shudder. Perhaps, we fear *more* the things that don’t move, and we wait with dread for them to exhibit signs of life. In a very basic, very simple sense, *Sole Survivor* exploits this fear nicely.

Looking to antecedents in the genre, *Sole Survivor*’s approach evokes memories of *Carnival of Souls* (1962) to some degree, and for this critic’s money, Eberhart’s feature is much creepier (if not as adrenaline-inducing) as the labyrinthian “mouse trap” cataclysms featured in *Final Destination*.

Sole Survivor won’t win any awards, but the acting is nicely deadpan and understated, and the movie doesn’t cop out with a happy ending.

Many '80s clichés are present (the car that won't start, the gratuitous "breast part of the movie," etc.) and the soundtrack sounds like studio recording outtakes from the cheapie 1980s TV anthology, *Tales of the Darkside* (1984–87). Yet the ideas present in the film are strong enough to gloss over flaws, and rendered with enough believability and verisimilitude to make the film worthy of a recommendation.

CLOSE-UP: Survivor's Syndrome: "Every once in a blue moon," states director Thom Eberhardt, the talent who also created *Night of the Comet*, "someone will mention *Sole Survivor* out of the blue."

"It just has to go right in there with Ed Wood's finest stuff," Eberhardt suggests with a self-deprecating laugh. "It's exactly that kind of thing. You may *only* mention it if you say I'm the first to admit that it was like a journey into Ed Wood territory..."

"It had a very good premise which I think has been used recently in *Final Destination*. Same sort of premise, where there's this big accident and everybody's killed except for one person. It's based on something I read in a magazine in a dentist's office. It was in *Psychology Today* and was one of those great pop psychology articles, about survivor's syndrome. Where if there's a big car crash and everybody in the family is killed except one person, that one person feels guilty for having survived. The survivor feels he or she shouldn't have lived. They're creeped out. And that's where the idea for the movie struck me.

"I sat down and wanted to write a little horror movie," the director details. "I was working at PBS and I didn't know anything about writing feature films, but what makes it an Ed Wood adventure is what happened next. A friend I knew from college who was an acting coach, stepped up. Now, I don't care for acting coaches. It's my own personal preference, but I think too often they lapse into amateur psychology. But anyway, he had a woman, a sort of middle-aged housewife-type, who was taking acting lessons from him.

"And her husband owned an office furniture manufacturing company, and my friend came to me and said 'You know, I think she's a really good actress.' Well, why the hell wouldn't he think that, since she's shelling out a hundred dollars a month to take acting lessons from him? So what's he going to say? 'No you can't act? Get out of here and save your money?' No, he's going to say, 'She's a tremendous little actress.' So she thought she was a good actress, and her husband, the furniture manufacturer—with all of his great dramatic sensibilities from manufacturing chairs and desks—knew she was a great actress.

So he says he'll put up three hundred thousand dollars to make this movie if his wife has a leading part."

Eberhardt sighs. "So starting from that point on, it got weirder and weirder. And of course, she was a horrible actress. And there was nothing I could do to cut her part down, or cut her part out. Because the second I did, I would raise the ire of the furniture manufacturer. At one point they did they throw me out. I delivered a cut of the movie which had her part seriously diminished. I went away for the weekend, and when I came back, all the locks had changed in the editing room, and there were new editors working on it..."

"Here's another real Ed Wood story. At one point, we needed an emergency room in a hospital, and we didn't have the money to pay for such a thing. But I had some contacts inside this one hospital because of the stuff I'd been doing while working at PBS, and I struck a deal with them that we could shoot in the hospital emergency room if—in exchange—I would give them a nice story for their hospital newsletter that would promote donating blood. So I would get all my crew members—and we shot it with a crew of about five, I think—to donate blood. We actually had to donate blood to shoot in this emergency room."

Lack of money and the team's inexperience were stumbling blocks on other occasions. "We didn't have money for car mounts or a car tow or anything like that. So we gaffer-taped Russ Carpenter [the director of photography] to the hood of the car, and put this motorcycle crash helmet on him. We didn't even have money for rope, so we took the duct tape and we went around the hood of the car and around Russ. And there he was—holding the camera in the middle of the night. And Anita [Skinner] is like this screwy actress who doesn't know about driving a car, and we're driving down this street in Santa Ana, California at 1:30 in the morning with a guy with a crash helmet taped on the front of her car, holding a camera shooting through the windshield. It was serious Ed Wood territory.

"When I got thrown out of the movie, I was really shook up over that. I didn't think the movie was great, but I thought it was okay, and I thought I made it better by cutting [the furniture manufacturer's wife] out as much as I could. However, the price I had to pay for getting called back was I had to put her back in. I also had to take out all the little stuff that was funny, because it was supposed to be a horror movie, but they also thought it had a chance to be a really great piece of film art. So I had to take out all the tongue-in-cheek stuff that was going on in the movie.

"It just became leaden," recalls the director. "The furniture manufacturer's wife was all over it, front to back, and we couldn't get rid of her. She stuck out like a sore thumb. And anything that made the movie sparkle a little bit—and it was hard to make it sparkle because all the lead characters died at the end—all that stuff was gone."

Yet these travails were just the beginning of the film's problems. "Then the furniture manufacturer got involved with a distributor, who went in and did a little distributor's trick to screw you out of money," Eberhardt details.

"Distributors come in and tell you the movie has to be re-cut, so what they do is re-cut the movie and charge back top dollar against the distribution fees that come in. And also, they said the movie needed to be re-scored. The best thing about the movie was the score! It was way better than the rest of the movie, in fact. But they went in and got rid of that score, and then threw in this kind of melodramatic organ score. It came from like an episode of *The Whistler* or something, off the radio. They used that and—of course—charged top dollar back against the production, as if Elmer Bernstein had been the composer. That way, when profits—such as they were—flowed back in, the distributor got to keep every nickel of it, because he's charged exorbitant fees against the production. That way, no money flowed back to the people who made the movie, which was the furniture manufacturer and his wife."

Even the processing of the film was cheapskate; Eberhardt remembers that one critic commented about how bad she thought the photography looked. "It did get a review in the *Los Angeles Times* ... and they completely panned it. At one point [the critic] started complaining about the terrible photography, that it was so bad and amateurish. One scene would start out slightly blue and then go slightly red..."

"Well, what she was complaining about was the fact that the distributor of that movie had it processed *at porn labs* ... wherever they could find a cheap deal. Even cheaper than that, they mixed and matched on reels. They'd send reels 2 through 5 to one place, and reels 6 through 10 another place to be processed. They'd get a deal at night where the film was going through left-over chemicals that had been used all day to process real movies, or to porn labs—where if they got caught, they went to jail—so the reels got processed really fast. So there were mixed-matched reels.

“What she was complaining about was just bargain basement porno lab processing, but the irony is that my director of photography on that movie was my very good friend, Russ Carpenter, who was shooting for me when I was doing afternoon specials. And Russ went on to win an Academy Award for shooting *Titanic* (1997).”

Today, Eberhardt evidences a good sense of humor about *Sole Survivor*, and even has an interesting, productive use for the film. “To me, it’s like the litmus test for when somebody needs to get out more. I was over in London shooting *Without a Clue* with Michael Caine and Ben Kingsley, and the first thing I heard from the British press was a message from a film writer who wanted to ask me questions about *Sole Survivor*.

“I was just intrigued by this guy, and I actually returned the call. I said, ‘First of all, where did you get a copy of that?’ He told me it was out on videotape and I said, ‘Oh, great.’ But it was clear to me that on some level, he really liked the movie a lot. So I kind of had to do this straight-faced interview, because I didn’t want to put him down. Then he went on to *Night of the Comet* and suddenly had all these technical questions! He was obsessed with how the characters survived ... it was weird.

“It would be interesting if a movie like *Sole Survivor* jumped out and became famous,” Eberhardt concludes with a chuckle. “But that wasn’t the case with that movie. It just went back into nowhere. I only remember it now because of the funny stories.”

Something Wicked This Way Comes

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“[A] tough-minded, often relentless adaptation ... It is a strangely dreamlike, punishing movie—something like a child’s nightmare ... [T]he movie is essentially a mood piece, oozing with creepy atmosphere, and its evocation of impending horror is beautifully achieved...”—Joe Baltake, “*Something Wicked Just Oozes With Creepies*,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 4, 1983, page 54.

“Ray Bradbury’s adaptation of his own story lacks coherence. Rounded characters are flattened ... Yet surprisingly, this film succeeds. Director Jack Clayton has very nearly created a mood piece ... we are treated to flashes of genuine brilliance...”—Harry Cheney, *Christianity Today*,

May 20, 1983, page 71.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jason Robards (Charles Halloway); Jonathan Pryce (Mr. Dark); Diane Ladd (Mrs. Nightshade); Royal Dano (Tom Fury); Vidal Peterson (Will Halloway); Shawn Carson (Jim Nightshade); Mary Grace Canfield (Miss Foley); Ellen Geer (Mrs. Halloway); Richard Davalos (Mr. Crosetti); Jake Dengel (Mr. Tetley); Jack Dodson (Dr. Dourglas); Bruce M. Fischer (Mr. Looger); Pam Grier (Dust Witch); Angelo Rossitto (Little Person #1); Peter D. Risch (Little Person #2); Arthur Hill (Narrator).

CREW: Walt Disney Productions Presents a Jack Clayton Film, a Bryna Company Production. *Casting:* Pam Politroni, Virginia Higgins. *Music Composed by:* James Horner. *Special Visual Effects:* Lee Dyer. *Costume Design:* Ruth Myers. *Unit Production Manager:* Richard Learman. *First Assistant Director:* Dan Kolsrud. *Second Assistant Director:* Lisa Marmon. *Film Editor:* Argyle Nelson, Barry Mark Gordon. *Production Designer:* Richard MacDonald. *Director of Photography:* Stephen H. Burum. *Screenplay:* Ray Bradbury (based on his novel). *Producer:* Peter Vincent Douglas. *Directed by:* Jack Clayton. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: “We are the hungry ones. Your torments call us like dogs in the night, and we do feed, and feed well ... We suck that misery and find it to be sweet.”—The malevolent Mr. Dark (Jonathan Pryce) reveals his identity to Charles Halloway (Jason Robards) and two frightened boys during a riveting scene from *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

SYNOPSIS: A strange carnival arrives in Green Town in 1932, run by the malevolent and dapper Mr. Dark (Pryce). Two local boys, Jim Nightshade (Carson) and Will Halloway (Peterson), run afoul of Dark and his Dust Witch (Grier) when they sneak into Dark's Pandemonium and Carnival. They learn that Dark and his cohorts have been seducing the town locals, including their teacher Miss Foley (Canfield), by fulfilling their deepest desires ... but then demanding a horrible price.

When Dark comes for the boys, the only person who can stand in his way is Will's dad Charles (Robards), the town librarian, a man with a heart condition and a soul full of regret over an incident in Will's youth.

When Dark makes off with the boys, threatening to transform them on

a carousel that can age people or revert them to childhood, Charles must confront his own past in Dark's Maze of Mirrors.

COMMENTARY: Although it brims with glorious, opulent special effects, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is a dark and intimate tale of the heart, one that understands the fear associated with aging and mortality. That, to quote the film, “It’s not what you’ve done that you regret, it’s the thing you didn’t do.”

In that regard, the film provides a splendid protagonist in Charles, played sensitively by Jason Robards. Will’s dad is older than the average father and thus acutely aware of time’s passage. More days are behind him than are ahead, and he has no illusions about that. Charles spends all of his time in the town library (books are immortal, after all) and never takes risks that could jeopardize his remaining years. He has a weak heart, after all.

“Just tell me that I’ll live forever,” Charles says, only half-joking, at one point in the film. He’s a character palpably afraid of death, so much so that he lives in guilt over an incident that happened years earlier at a nearby river ... when he should have acted to save his four-year-old son’s life, but didn’t. He was too afraid, and so a friend, Harry Nightshade, rescued Will. Now Charles fears death and lives in a constant state of regret.

All around Charlie, director Jack Clayton accentuates the feeling of death encroaching. The film opens with a tableau of orange and browns as autumn leaves fall. And autumn, of course, always portends endings in film. Halloween approaches, the days grow short, and death—riding in on a train, and made manifest by Mr. Dark—arrives.

Mr. Dark, played in methodical, perfectly mannered fashion by a slow-walking and elegant Jonathan Pryce, finds exactly the weakness that will bring souls to him. He puts each seduced character before a mirror and the reflection reveals their weakness, their foible. In the film’s finest and most compelling sequence, a vengeful Mr. Dark comes—at last—to reserved Charles in the library, and begins ripping out pages in a book, actually years from Charles’ life span. He does this, he says, to give him a taste of death so he will remember it when it comes. In this scene, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* really gets to the crux of the matter, of feeling old, of fear and death, of the life lived through the looking glass of pride and vanity. Charles sees his regret—not saving Will on that day long ago. Mr. Dark tells him he is a failure as a father and a man, willing the kindly old man to “drown” in his regrets.

It's a triumph, of course, when Charles fights back, overcomes his fears (accepts his mortality) and rescues the boys. Mr. Dark is vanquished, aged on his merry-go-round of doom, and a tornado blows away the carnival and autumn. The dark fairy tale culminates with the idea that we can conquer our demons.

Even though *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is a Disney film, and therefore aimed at children, it also has a deep sexual subtext. Young Jim Nightshade, for instance, can't wait to grow up, to be a man, to know the things that adults know. He peeps at the dancers in one of the carnival tents, and Mr. Dark accurately reads his soul. He offers him the chance to grow up, "to be trusted; to be feared; to know what grown-ups do behind locked doors."

Later, he taunts the boy with his mother's sexuality and the boy's inability to fulfill his mother in that fashion, since he's but a child. "Your mother came to the merry-go-round tonight," tantalizes Dark, revealing that Jim's mother rode "backwards and forwards," an explicit sexual reference. Dark also refers to Pam Grier, the witch, as Jim's "new" mother, an indication that she will school him in the "adult" matters he dreams of.

Adapted by Ray Bradbury from his own text, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* offers a truly atmospheric and melancholy look at a dark world. The film's only truly terrifying sequence involves an incursion of supernatural spiders in the boys' room. The scene is vetted in progressively quicker cuts, effective close-up photography and culminates with a long slow pullback so the audience can detect the army of spiders pulsating and wriggling on the bed. This scene, much too intense for children, earns the film its horror stripes.

Something Wicked This Way Comes only disappoints in its final moments, when the impressive (and no doubt costly) optical effects storm the film and grab center stage, shunting the emotional, human story aside for phantasmagoric thrills. But except for this small quibble, the film remains a neo-classic, a dark fantasy on the order of *The Wizard of Oz*. Only this movie is for grown-ups; especially ones who—in the middle of the night—have heard Mr. Dark knocking on their door.

Spasms
★★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Fonda (Tom Brezman); Oliver Reed (Jason Kincaid); Kerrie Keane (Susanne Kincaide); Al Waxman (Crowley); Miguel Fernandes (Mendez); Marilyn Lightstone (Dr. Claire Rothman); Angus McInnes (Deacon Tyrone); Laurie Brown (Allison); Gerard Parker (Captain Novack); William Needles (Franklin); Patrick Byrne (Agent); Al Mann (Interpreter); Denise Ferguson (Psycho Patient); John Bayliss (Chauffeur); Barry Flatman (Reporter); David Bolt (Customs Officer); Walker Boone (Sgt. Brodie); Les Rubie (Jennifer).

CREW: *Presented by:* Cinequity Corporation and Martin Erlichman. *Executive Producers:* Martin Erlichman, John G. Pozhke, Maurice Smith. *Produced by:* John G. Pozhke, Maurice Smith. *Original Score:* Eric N. Robertson. *Serpent's Theme Composed and Performed by:* Tangerine Dream. *Film Editor:* Ralph Brunjes. *Art Director:* Gavin Mitchell. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Based on the novel by:* Michael Maryk, Brent Monahan. *Screenplay:* Don Enrigh. *Co-Producers:* John Newton, Gordon Robinson. *Canadian Special Effects Director:* Brian Warner. *Special Effects Consultant:* Colin Chilvers. *Directed by:* William Fruet. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A wealthy hunter named Kincaid (Reed) believes he has developed a form of telepathy with the giant demon snake that once bit him, and recruits a down-on-his luck university E.S.P. researcher, Tom Brezman (Fonda), to help him prove the link. Kincaid has arranged for the capture of the great serpent in New Guinea, where it is revered as a god, but the Church of Satan also wants the creature because its members believe it is an incarnation of the Devil.

The giant snake arrives in America after killing one agent of the Church of Satan en route. It is taken to Tom's university lab, where it kills again and ultimately escapes. The giant snake crosses the campus on a murderous rampage and now Tom must help Kincaid re-connect his mental link with the serpent so that they can catch it before it kills again. Alone and armed with a machine gun, Kincaid rushes out to fight his nemesis, his ward Susanne (Keane) and Brezman in hot pursuit.

COMMENTARY: What would a decade be without a few bad snake movies? The 1970s gave the world *Stanley* (1971) and—don't say it, hiss it—*SSSSSS* (1972). The ante was officially upped in the 1980s with the arrival of *Spasms*, a ludicrous horror entry that bafflingly features two A-list actors, Oliver Reed and Peter Fonda, in lead roles. They're both slumming here with the snakes, and so are you.

However, *Spasms* shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. The film spotlights one brilliant and extended attack scene that is worth the price of admission (or a rental).

Late in the film, the giant, possibly Satanic snake attacks a college campus and a girl's dorm. (Boy, those snakes have good taste, don't they?) Leaving aside how exploitative this set-up is, consider the set piece.

The snake attacks a lovely young woman on the staircase, and director William Fruet has his camera adopt the P.O.V. of the snake, racing up the stairs behind her. In quick cuts, the snake sinks his teeth into the prey and tosses the young co-ed around the hall like a rag doll (right past a poster of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, in fact). Blood splatters the walls, and then the snake finally releases his victim, with—um—a great deal of momentum. The throttled woman flies through a door, into a bathroom—where a gorgeous, naked housemate just happens to be showering. The camera adopts the bather's shocked perspective, as the bloodied quarry flies towards the camera and smacks right into the shower enclosure glass with a bloody—and moist—splat.

Gruesome? Indeed, yet this scene reflects superior ingenuity, and achieves maximum impact (literally). It's beautifully orchestrated, shot, and edited, and so *Spasms* deserves some kudos for bringing it to life.

A few other scenes also feature gory moments, but few boast the effect of that vicious assault on the co-ed. In one nasty sequence, a snake bites a fellow who is trying to steal it, and his arm begins to balloon up. A heartbeat is heard on the soundtrack, speeding up, and—well—the thief doesn't make it. The title of the film refers to the death throes of this snake's victims, in case you had any doubt.

The remainder of *Spasms* isn't nearly as impressive. What makes the film tedious is all the blue-tinted P.O.V. "snake" shots and Reed's interminable flashbacks. Also, when the snake is finally revealed on camera, it's a big, fat disappointment. Director Fruet tries vainly to hide the inadequate special effects with fast-motion photography, but the technique doesn't work real well. Fast-motion photography is indicative of comedy (like the Keystone Cops), and never works as well in horror as slow-motion photography does.

The climax is a resounding dud too. Fonda—a university professor, mind you—runs into a clearing with a machine gun, faces the snake, and peppers the thing with more bullets than Dick Cheney quail

hunting with a lobbyist. End of movie. By this point, the snake has already dispatched Reed in a battle. Why didn't Reed just shoot it too? He is a hunter, after all. That's a question that isn't answered in the film. *Spasms* has such an abrupt, ill-conceived ending that it feels like the production team just packed up shop and everyone went home.

Ten to Midnight



Cast and Crew

CAST: Charles Bronson (Leo Kessler); Lisa Eilbacher (Laurie Kessler); Andrew Stevens (McCann); Gene Davis (Warren Stacey); Geoffrey Lewis (Dave Dante; Robert Lyons (Nathan Zager); Wilford Brimley (Malone); Cosie Costa (Dudle); Iva Lane (Bunny); Bert Williams (Mr. Johnson); Ola Ray (Ola); Kelly Palzis (Doreen); Paul McCallum (Lab Tech); Jenna Tomasina (Karen); June Gilbert (Betty); Arthur Hansel (Judge); Sam Chew (Minister); Katrina Parish (Tina).

CREW: The Cannon Group Inc. Presents a Golan Globus Production, for City Ltd., A J. Lee Thompson film. *Casting:* John Crowther. *Film Editor:* Peter Lee-Thompson. *Director of Photography:* Adam Greenburg. *Music:* Robert O'Ragland. *Stunt Coordinator:* Ernie Orsati. *Executive Producers:* Manahem Golan, Yolan Globus. *Written by:* William Roberts. *Producers:* Pancho Kohner, Lance Hool. *Directed by:* J. Lee Thompson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Warren Stacey (Davis), a diabolical serial killer, murders female co-workers who have rejected him while simultaneously arranging iron-clad alibis so the police can't lay a finger on him. Investigating the murder of a girl named Betty (Gilbert), Detective Leo Kessler (Bronson)—a cop who thinks the legal system is broken—teams up with a novice detective, McCann (Stevens), to catch the killer.

Warren commits another murder and again prepares a perfect alibi, so is released from prison over Kessler's objections. Tired of Kessler's harassment, Warren sets his murderous sights on Laurie (Eilbacher), Kessler's daughter and a student nurse. Kessler plants evidence to catch Warren but is exposed in court and suspended from the force. Kessler launches a one-man war against Stacey, but the killer—who commits his murderous acts in the nude—has already engineered the perfect way to escape Kessler's keen eye and kill Laurie and all of her

suite-mates.

COMMENTARY: A young, attractive, and physically fit serial killer blow-dries his hair, dons his Members Only jacket and slaps on expensive brand name after-shave before heading out to commit murder in director J. Lee Thompson's prescient *Ten to Midnight*, a Charles Bronson police-crime thriller with a decidedly horrific bent.

More than ten years after the film's release, the similarly themed *American Psycho* (2000) starring Christian Bale explored much the same disturbing territory, charting the rise and fall of a beautiful predator who fits perfectly into an affluent, looks-obsessed society and hides behind a smiling yuppie veneer.

Stacey, played to creepy effect by an energetic Gene Davis, looks terrific in his tailored business suit and vest, and equally comfortable in the buff. In fact, the murderer conducts his crimes naked because he doesn't want to soil his expensive wardrobe, though there may be an underlying motivation too.

"If anybody does something like this," declares Bronson's hard-boiled cop, "their knife's got to be their penis."

The psychology doesn't delve a whole lot deeper than that in the film, but *Ten to Midnight* captures, like so many films of its day, the inherent duality of the 1980s: the unsettling idea that beneath the surface appearance of wealth and fashion that were on display in much of the culture, something sick could lurk and grow in secret.

Here, the killer is handsome, gainfully employed, well-dressed—and maniacal and perverted. So many slasher films of the 1980s feature a killer in a costume that explicitly draws the viewer's eye and is notably out of place. By contrast, Stacey's uniform of choice is business-wear and the mask he adorns is the smiling, good-looking face of affluence. Yet when stripped bare of these accoutrements, the man's every bit the monster that Jason is. The notion of a killer or deviant walking undetected among the populace had extra currency in the decade of Reagan for a few important reasons.

Firstly, Americans had become a more transient people in the 1980s. The quest for high-paying jobs meant that the typical American family would move from region to region, if necessary, from the aging Rust Belt in the Northeast to the growing Sun Belt in the South. Or, even more tellingly, into the newly gentrified urban areas of the 1980s, where a rise in housing prices had spurred commercial growth and

displaced the poor.

The advent of fast and inexpensive air travel coupled with the tendency to put down roots where there was work, not necessarily where one had been raised, meant that—for the first time—many suburbanites could not make the claim to know their neighbors. A paranoia thus arose about “the people next door.” They looked all right on the surface, but those in the new tract development beside them knew nothing of their history, their family, or their background. This meant, essentially, that a monster could flourish in anonymity.

This paranoia about the man sitting beside you on the commuter train is evident in early 1980s films such as *The Thing* and *Ten to Midnight*, and was ultimately validated as a legitimate public concern by the end of the decade. For instance, in August of 1986, the so-called “Preppie Killer,” Robert Chambers, murdered 18-year-old beauty Jennifer Levin in Manhattan’s Central Park. Chambers was an extremely good-looking, socially adroit young man, one you would not suspect of murder. But as the investigation into Levin’s death became a New York obsession, it was learned that Chambers had practiced so-called deviant acts, and apparently shown no remorse or regret over his transgression.

Like Warren Stacey in *Ten to Midnight*, Chambers made himself out to be the victim. He reportedly described how Levin had attacked *him*, in her wanton desire for sex, and he had been forced to kill her in self-defense. In *Ten to Midnight*, Warren is similarly obsessed himself, because, after all, it was the “me” decade, the decade of greed. A sociopath with no concern for others, he is intent on wronging those who transgressed against him.

And then, of course, there was another brand of “anonymous” criminal who wore business suits in the 1980s and walked among the general populace without notice. This type was known as the corporate raider, the Gordon Gekko, or, to employ a real-life example, Ivan Boesky. These men raised and lost fortunes, bilked investors out of life savings, and lined their own pockets with treasure all to the detriment of the community and the general good. Yet—to all appearances—they looked like fine, upstanding members of America’s business class.

In its evident concern about a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a killer from America’s elite (a white, yuppie male), *Ten to Midnight* seized on a trend that, by the end of the 1980s, would actually become so common that it was then considered clichéd to attack upwardly

mobile professionals.

The slasher in *Ten to Midnight* is actually the most fascinating aspect of this film, as he appears an early indication of this looming paranoia about one's neighbor; about the glib, glitzy surface values of the 1980s hiding a deep, dark underbelly. The remainder of the film feels like a clichéd diatribe against the American legal system.

"I remember when legal meant lawful, now it means some kind of loophole," Kessler complains at one point. Ironically, Kessler seeks to rectify this perceived flaw in the system by breaking the law himself and planting evidence against the man he deems to be a killer.

"Forget what's legal, do what's right," he suggests. And in this phrase, he is echoing none other than the nation's leader, President Ronald Reagan, who, during his first term in office, stated the following: "There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right."

It is tempting to eschew the law and champion moral values. The question becomes, whose moral values, precisely? The prevailing ideal of America is that one is innocent until proven guilty. The burden is on authority, on the legal system, to prove malfeasance, and that is, in fact, the very thing that protects everybody's civil liberties. The problem with doing "what's right" rather than what's legal is this: Not everybody agrees what is right because "right" is a morally subjective value. Whereas the law is a good guide because it is written, settled and objective. That's why "what is right" isn't a fair guide by which to prosecute somebody of a crime, even if that somebody is clearly a lunatic, like Stacey.

Horror fans will find that, like the slasher paradigm so popular at the time, *Ten to Midnight* features some terrifying stalk and chase sequences. Early in the film, Stacey pursues a would-be victim through the woods. He stabs the nude woman, but doesn't rape her, then goes calmly back to the movie theater to establish his alibi. This sequence is terrifying, and quite original, since both attacker and victim are nude. The most harrowing scene is the final chase. Stacey goes after Kessler's daughter—naked, of course, save for the bouquet he carries. He attacks several nurses and kills three of them in brutal fashion, but not Laurie. She hides under the bed as he searches the suite for her and the tension is real. Laurie burns the killer's face with a curling iron and then flees, with Stacey behind her for a long chase down a conveniently empty night street.

In the end, Kessler shows up out of the blue (and apparently from thin air) to rescue his daughter and stop Stacey's killing spree. So the film ends on a clichéd note. But lurking underneath this pro-law-and-order police film is the cogently presented fear that terror lives next door; and it's a lot harder to prosecute a good-looking man in a business suit, one who is aware of his rights, than it is the common street criminal.

Twilight Zone: The Movie

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Other than the parts with Albert Brooks and Dan Aykroyd, this film makes you want to run back and watch the original episodes with newfound appreciation, because the TV shows were better! Spielberg’s take on ‘Kick the Can’ is probably better than the original, but the new versions of ‘It’s a Good Life’ and ‘Nightmare at 20,000 Feet’ just don’t work. Joe Dante is at his most–*Gremlins* hyper on the ‘It’s a Good Life’ update, going for a cartoon-inspired lunacy that just isn’t scary. The ‘Nightmare’ update was equally hyper. ‘Little Girl Lost’—now there’s an episode that film might have done some interesting things with. Instead, we get John Landis with a boring lecture on racism that gives only one good thing to the movie-going audience—it further defines the demise of Douglas C. Neidermeyer of *Animal House* fame. Jerry did some nice music, particularly for ‘Kick the Can.’ Rod Serling deserves an apology.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST:

Prologue: Albert Brooks (Driver); Dan Aykroyd (Passenger).

Segment #1: Vic Morrow (Bill); Doug McGrath (Larry); Charles Hallahan (Ray); Remus Peets, Kai Wulff (German Officers); Sue Dugan (Waitress #1); Debby Porter (Waitress #2); Steven Williams (Bar Patron); Annette Claudier (French Mother); Joseph Hieu, Albert Leong (Vietnamese); Stephen Bishop (Charming G.I.); Thomas Byrd, Vincent J. Isaac, William B. Tayler, Domingo Ambriz (G.I.s); Eddie Dono, Michael Milgram, John Larroquette (K.K.K.).

Segment #2 (“Kick the Can”): Scatman Crothers (Mr. Bloom); Bill

Quinn (Mr. Conroy); Martin Garner (Mr. Weinstein); Selma Diamond (Mrs. Weinstein); Helen Shaw (Mrs. Dempsey); Murray Matheson (Mr. Agree); Peter Brocco (Mr. Mute); Priscilla Pointer (Ms. Cox); Scott Nemes (Young Mr. Weinstein); Laura Mooney (Young Mrs. Dempsey).

Segment #3 (“It’s a Good Life”): Kathleen Quinlan (Helen Foley); Jeremy Licht (Anthony); Kevin McCarthy (Uncle Walt); Patricia Barry (Mom); William Schallert (Father); Nancy Cartwright (Ethel); Dick Miller (Walter Paisley); Cherie Currie (Sara); Bill Mumy (Tim).

Segment #4 (“Nightmare at 20,000 Feet”): John Lithgow (Valentine); Abbe Lane (Senior Stewardess); Donna Dixon (Junior Stewardess); John Dennis Johnston (Co-Pilot); Larry Cedar (Creature); Charles Knapp (Sky Marshal); Christine Nigra (Little Girl); Lonna Schwab (Mother); Margaret Wheeler (Old Woman); Byron McFarland (Pilot Announcement); Carol Serling (Passenger).

CREW:

Prologue & Segment #1: *Written and Directed by:* John Landis. *Director of Photography:* Stevan Larner. *Film Editor:* Malcolm Campbell. *Associate Producer:* George Folsey.

Segment #2 (“Kick the Can”): *Written by:* George Clayton Johnson, Richard Matheson, Josh Rogan. *Story by:* George Clayton Johnson. *Directed by:* Steven Spielberg. *Director of Photography:* Allen Daviau. *Film Editor:* Michael Kahn. *Associate Producer:* Kathleen Kennedy.

Segment #3 (“It’s a Good Life”): *Written by:* Richard Matheson. *Story by:* Jerome Bixby. *Directed by:* Joe Dante. *Director of Photography:* John Hora. *Film Editor:* Tina Hirsch. *Associate Producer:* Michael Finnell. *Special Makeup Designed and Created by:* Rob Bottin.

Segment #4 (“Nightmare at 20,000 Feet”): *Written by:* Richard Matheson. *Story by:* Richard Matheson. *Directed by:* George Miller. *Director of Photography:* Allen Daviau. *Film Editor:* Howard Smith. *Associate Producer:* John Davison. *Special Makeup Created by:* Craig Reardon, Michael McCracken.

Produced by: Steven Spielberg, John Landis. *Executive Producer:* Frank Marshall. *Inspired by The Twilight Zone, created by:* Rod Serling. *Production Designer:* James D. Bissell. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Casting:* Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Marci Liroff. *Project Consultant:* Carol Serling. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four macabre and fantastic tales from the land of “shadow

and substance,” the Twilight Zone.

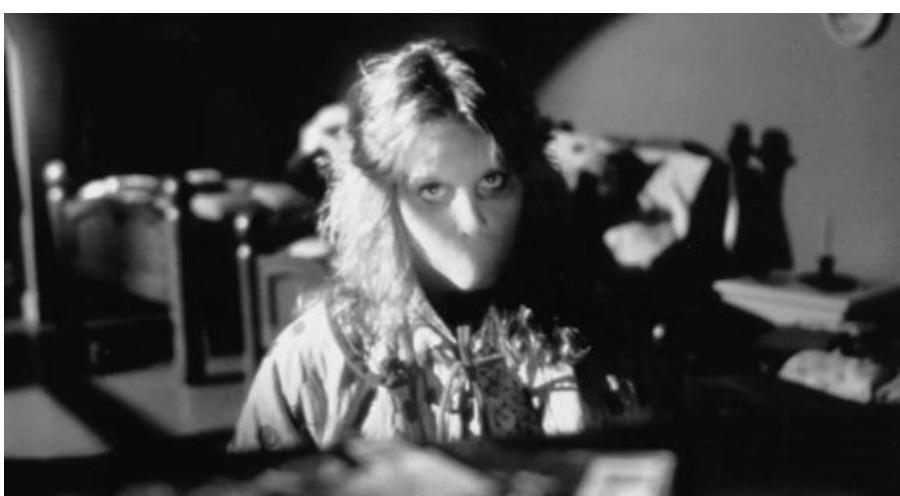
In the first, a racist named Bill (Morrow) gets a taste of his own hateful medicine when he becomes a Jew in Nazi Germany; an African-American at a KKK rally in the South; and a “gook” during the Vietnam War.

In the second tale, kindly old Mr. Bloom (Scatman Crothers) brings joy, vitality, youth and the idea of play to Sunnyvale Retirement Home through a magical game called Kick the Can.

In the third, teacher Helen Foley (Quinlan) encounters young Anthony (Licht), a boy who can make any wish come true, and who terrorizes his family.

In the final tale, a nervous flyer named Valentine (Lithgow) sees a mischievous gremlin on the wing of an airliner in flight during a terrible storm.

COMMENTARY: The movie brat generation (meaning Steven Spielberg, John Landis, and Joe Dante, among others) grew up with Rod Serling’s black-and-white weekly TV anthology, *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64). Many of their films are homages to favorite productions from their collective childhood so a film based on the TV classic should seem like a no-brainer. Although two of the stories, “It’s a Good Life” and “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet,” work rather well on the big screen, they still pale in comparison with the original series’ installments on which they’re based. Even more dramatically, the Landis segment and Spielberg’s “Kick the Can” are nearly full-fledged disasters.



One of Anthony's cartoony (but horrific) "improvements" to his terrorized family in Joe Dante's "It's a Good Life," the third installment in *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983). That's Cherie Currie without a mouth.

Actor Vic Morrow and two children died on the set filming the first story. Because this segment was not finished when the helicopter accident occurred, perhaps audiences will never know if this John Landis installment could have come out better. As it stands now, it's a weak tale that simply doesn't understand a sense of proportion. William Connor (Vic Morrow) is depicted as a man "with a chip the size of the national debt" on his shoulder, a man who has a blind hatred for all non-white males. In the story, he rails against a Jewish man who got a promotion over him. He comments on Arabs and "niggers" and is generally a very distasteful guy. Immediately, one wants to punch him in the mouth.

Had this story been vetted by Rod Serling, Connor would rise one morning to find himself a black man. Throughout his day, he would be confronted head on with racism and come to learn the error of his ways. It would be a thoughtful tale, but in the end, the racist would learn something about himself and human nature. *The Twilight Zone* always meted justice, but it didn't have to be cruel justice.

In contrast, Landis's story sends Connor off to Nazi Germany, where he is perceived as a Jew and chased. Then to a Ku Klux Klan cross-burning where he's perceived to be an African-American and chased. Then to Vietnam, where American soldiers label him a gook and also

chase him. The accent is on action, which is totally wrong for *Twilight Zone*. Indeed, this was the very thing that Rod Serling toiled so long and hard to prevent from happening to his TV shows. He never wanted *Night Gallery* (1970–73) to be what he called “*Mannix* in a graveyard.” That’s exactly the kind of story Landis created.

Making matters worse, this tale ends as Connor is captured in Nazi Germany and forced on a train. He is marked with a yellow star (as a Jew) and trotted off to a concentration camp for extermination. In the end, as the train pulls out of the station, he can just make out his friends, but they fail to notice him. So, a couple of racial slurs in a bar merit extermination in the gas chamber? Ignorance is a crime worthy of death? In this story, Connor doesn’t actually burn crosses, kill gooks or persecute Jews. He merely speaks about these groups in slurs. It’s distasteful, it’s ugly, it’s certainly in bad taste. But isn’t it just slightly out of proportion that he should die because of his transgressions? Where is the line drawn?

Worse, Connor’s death precludes the character from learning anything about his experience. He will be exterminated and no good will come out of it. Basically, everything that could be wrong with this story is wrong. It focuses on action instead of character, and that’s hard to tolerate, especially since people died crafting the segment’s useless action moments. Secondly, the punishment doesn’t fit the crime. And thirdly, no learning, no good comes from the experience.

In Steven Spielberg’s treacly “Kick the Can,” a group of cuddly old people are magically granted an opportunity to be children again when a kindly stranger (Scatman Crothers) brings a night of magic to their dreary nursing home. (This harmless fantasy is a remake of a series episode.) In Serling’s finest moments, on display in the teleplay “Walking Distance,” for instance, Serling understood there’s just one go-round in life. Too cute by half, Spielberg’s non-horror story explores the idea that “when you stop playing, you get old.” Nicely put, though there’s also dignity in aging gracefully. Spielberg’s enduring flaw as a director remains that he always veers too sharply into syrupy sentimentality when a more objective, restrained stance would actually make the material far more touching.

Joe Dante’s installment, a huge step up in terms of quality, stars Kathleen Quinlan as a schoolteacher trapped in a boy’s cartoon rubber reality. This story adroitly alternates images of hellish horror (like a sister, played by Cherie Currie, who has lost her mouth), with camp performances from the likes of Kevin McCarthy. The special effects are impressive, particularly the strange cartoon demons. Anthony’s bunny

monster is pure nightmare fodder, but again, the film fails to achieve the level of horror generated in the original story (which starred Bill Mumy as the tiny tyrant). Instead, this segment raises more questions than it answers. Quinlan's character is able to get Anthony to wish away all of his terrors. She does so by promising to be his mother. Anthony complies, and he and his new mom drive off to a metaphorical sunset, fantasy flowers blooming all around them. Oh, how sweet...



John Lithgow goes head-to-head with a gremlin on the wing of the plane in the last—and best—segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet.”

Wait a minute! What about his family? Did Anthony's sister get her mouth back? Did he wish away his parents to oblivion or are they still alive? *Twilight Zone: The Movie* never tells us...

“Nightmare at 20,000 Feet” ends the movie on fine horror footing as John Lithgow fights a gremlin on the wing of the plane. Director George Miller’s claustrophobic story employs tight framing and intense close-ups to create the impression of entrapment on a plane

that could easily become a flying coffin. Lithgow sweats, gnashes his teeth, goes insane, and all the color drains out of him as he faces the gremlin. This episode is truly scary, and there are several electrifying jolts.

Twilight Zone: The Movie is slicker and more manipulative than its TV counterpart, yet less clever and less terrifying. Landis's segment makes a statement, Spielberg's not only plucks but throttles the heart strings, and that leaves Dante and Miller to do their best, but they're bolstering a sinking ship. Audiences went to see this movie (even after the helicopter accident) because they wanted what the movie promised: to see something really scary. "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" qualifies in that regard, but then, so do the reruns...

LEGACY: *The Twilight Zone* is too good a franchise to keep down. Even after the movie failed to live up to expectations at the box office, a new TV series aired on CBS for two seasons (1985–87). Also, UPN revived *The Twilight Zone* (hosted by Forest Whitaker) for one season in 2002.

Videodrome

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"So this is what happened to James Woods to make him so creepy! It all makes a lot more sense now. This is one of those movies in which the ideas it throws out in the beginning end up being a lot more intriguing than the execution. Brainwashing via TV is—heh—a perfect metaphor for the mass general psychosis of the late 20th century, but the film ends up being all about Cronenberg's body issues ... and many of his films tend to be. His particular hang-ups here, though, aren't ones that I, at least, share ... and I suspect a lot of others don't either."—MaryAnn Johanson, *The Flick Filosopher*, film critic.

"Cronenberg continued to evolve with *Videodrome*, and some of his common themes were becoming apparent, particularly his obsession with what I'll call biomechanics, where living beings and machines begin to merge. In *Videodrome*, it's not exactly hardware (unless a VHS tape is hardware), but James Woods is losing his identity to 'interfacing' with a video signal. A challenge to comprehend (and we were all hoping Deborah Harry would be a knockout actress because she was wonderful to look at, and unfortunately, she was only good),

but something was trying to work itself out of his psyche (and it finally would with *The Fly*).”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Woods (Max Renn); Sonja Smits (Bianca O'Blivion); Deborah Harry (Nicki Brand); Peter Dvorsky (Harlan); Les Carlson (Barry Convex); Jack Creley (Brian O'Blivion); Lynne Gorman (Marsha); Retner Schwarz (Moses); Henry Gomez (Brolley).

CREW: An International Production, a Pierre David and Victor Solnicki presentation of a David Cronenberg film. *Casting:* Walker Bowen, Inc. *Art Director:* Carol Spier. *Film Editor:* Ronald Sanders. *Music:* Howard Shore. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Executive Producers:* Victor Solnicki, Pierre David. *Producer:* Claude Heroux. *Choreography:* Kristeen Etherington. *Special Makeup Designed and Created by:* Rick Baker. *Written and Directed by:* David Cronenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Soon all of us will have special names ... names that will resonate with the cathode ray tube.”—Brian O'Blivion forecasts the dawn of reality television ... or something darker ... in David Cronenberg's masterpiece *Videodrome*.

SYNOPSIS: Max Renn (Woods), the president of Channel 83/Cable 12, a TV station specializing in everything from softcore sex to hardcore violence, is in search of new programming that will push the envelope and be “tough.” He discovers a torture show—possibly a snuff program—that seems to be emanating from Pittsburgh and is called *Videodrome*.

Meanwhile, Max dates radio therapist and affirmed sado-masochist Nicki Brand (Harry), and falls in love with her. But his affair with her seems to be part of a grander plot; a plot to draw him into the strange new world of *Videodrome*—where video and flesh are one, the “new flesh.” Renn finds himself transforming, evolving into something new, as he becomes a programmed assassin for *Videodrome*. His only hope is Bianca O'Blivion (Smits), who holds the secret of her father's legacy.

COMMENTARY: David Cronenberg's horror films universally evoke a deep discomfort with matters of the flesh. In his highly individual ventures, human bodies might explode (*Scanners*), bond with machinery (*The Fly*), or grow odd appendages (*Existenz*). The human form in the oeuvre of Cronenberg hosts diseases (*Rabid*) and twists sexuality into something perverse (*Dead Ringers*).

All of the above also happens in *Videodrome*. Or almost, anyway. It's a deeply disconcerting gaze at mankind's future, which Cronenberg sees as a fusion of television and flesh; a world wherein men can be programmed like VCRs and fed instructions on VHS tapes downloaded directly into their tummies. It may not be your cup of tea.

There's a conspiracy afoot in *Videodrome*, but it's hard to ferret out who's fighting with whom, and which side the viewer should be on. The film starts out on a dynamic, kinky note as bored station manager Renn (James Woods) seeks ever more perverse sexual material, only to stumble across an honest-to-goodness snuff channel (soon to be on DirecTV!).

These early portions are powerfully presented and clearly vetted, and then, even better, sultry Deborah Harry enters the picture as Nicki Brand, a fetishist and masochist. She likes to cut herself and is turned on by torture. In one intimate sex scene with the weasel-like Woods, the film shows Renn penetrating Brand's ear with a needle, and then licking the blood off. He pierces both her ears in this fashion and she clearly likes the pain. A camera pull-back then reveals that the lovers are in the *Videodrome* torture room! Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*! But then, this is revealed as Renn's fantasy. The one thing he can't have, but wants: sex and death co-mingled.

Cronenberg continued to diagram the specifics of kinky, painful sexual intercourse in *Crash* (1995), but in *Videodrome* he drops the idea like a hot potato after a few scenes and instead focuses on the Cathode Ray Mission, and the fight for supremacy between O'Blivion's cult of "the new flesh" and *Videodrome*. Turns out watching *Videodrome* creates brain tumors. Oh, and *Videodrome* is not just a TV show, it's a giant hallucination machine.

This part of Cronenberg's film grows confusing and distancing, since ultimately Woods becomes a programmed assassin and is not even following his own will any more. Whose will is he following? We're not sure. Maybe we need an instant replay.

Perhaps it's better merely just to appreciate the strange, revolutionary visuals fostered here than seek narrative clarity or deeper contextual meaning. In one instance, Renn grows a gaping, pulsating vagina on his chest (all the better to play VHS tapes), and in another a TV bursts to swollen, sexual life, depicting Nicki's luscious lips.

"Open up to me," Nicki seductively beckons, "there's something I want to play for you."

If it's *Videodrome*, I just hope the tape comes with Cliff's Notes.

X-tro



Critical Reception

"This was touted as the antithesis of Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, and without a doubt, it was. Freakish horrors that defy description are fused with a harsh tone, laden with grime and gloom that may detach the viewer from the film, straight off. Further, the creators of *X-tro* seem to revel in the notion of rubbing their audience's nose in their skewed and brutal cinematic mess-terpiece. The camera seldom flinches, and the grotesqueries are offered up in full view with one jaw-dropping scene after another. Nothing cute and cuddly here, unless—of course—it's a topless Maryam D'Abo."—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

"So much of the movie is a matter of outright mimicry of motifs from recent genre hits (including a lot of undigested Cronenberg), and so little of it is blessed with either imagination or coherence..."—Phil Hardy, *The Film Encyclopedia Volume II: Science Fiction*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984, page 379.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Philip Sayer (Sam); Bernice Stegers (Rachel); Danny Brainin (Joe); Maryam D'Abo (Analise); Simon Nash (Tony); Peter Mandell (Clown); David Cardy (Michael); Anna Wing (Mrs. Goodman); Robert Fyfe (Doctor); Katerine Best (Jane); Robert Pereno (Ben); Tok (Commando); Tik (Monster); Susie Silvey (Woman in Cottage); Arthur Whybrow (Mr. Knight); Anna Mottram (Teacher); Robert Astin (Van Driver); Vanya Seager (Paula).

CREW: *Presented by:* Amalgamated Film Enterprises Ltd. and New Line Cinema Corp. *Special Effects Supervisor:* Tom Harris. *Creature Effects:* Francis Coates. *Visual Consultant:* Christopher Hobbs. *Art Director:* Andrew Mollo. *Director of Photography:* John Metcalfe. *Film Editor:* Nicolas Gaster. *Music Composed and Performed by:* Harry Bromley Davenport. *Screenplay:* Iain Cassie, Robert Smith. *Based on an original screenplay by:* Michel Perry, Harry Bromley Davenport. *Additional Dialogue:* Jo Ann Kaplan. *Associate Producer:* James. M. Crawford. *Executive Producer:* Robert Shaye. *Producer:* Mark Forstater. *Additional*

Special Effects Makeup: John Webber. *Casting:* Joyce Callie. *Mechanical Effects:* Tom Harris. *Directed by:* Harry Bromley Davenport. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young boy named Tony (Nash) sees his beloved father Sam (Sayer) abducted by aliens at the family cottage in the woods, but nobody—including his mom Rachel (Stegers)—believes his story. Three years later, Rachel is dating Joe (Brainin), a fashion photographer, and living in London with a gorgeous young woman named Analise (D’Abo), when Sam returns, out of the blue.

Sam is not quite himself. Unbeknownst to anyone, he is actually the full-grown offspring of an alien-human rape! Now, Sam wants to take Tony back to space with him, even though this means giving Tony an odd alien power to make his fantasies come true. Tony uses this power to manifest a malevolent clown (Mandell) and a life-size, homicidal Commando doll (Tok), which he uses to kill his downstairs neighbor (Wing).

Time runs out for Sam as his human body starts to decay while making love to Rachel. He takes Tony into the woods for a rendezvous with an alien ship, leaving behind on Earth a series of alien eggs, which have sprung from a cocooned Analise.

COMMENTARY: *X-tro* is a kinky and disgusting, if not *x-tro-ordinary* horror movie that ceaselessly couples sex and gore with alarming, distasteful results. *X-tro* is oddly creepy and off-putting, and it gets under the skin ... even if it doesn’t make a lick of sense.

X-tro’s most disturbing and effective scene is a perversion of the human reproductive process. In 1979, Ridley Scott’s *Alien* made a mockery of human mating, co-opting our vulnerable bodies and turning them into receptacles for the hostile xenomorph. *X-tro*’s *modus operandi* is not far removed from that.

An alien arrives on Earth, and we see it on a country road. The special effects are quite good, and the creature seems very realistically inhuman. When next the creature appears, it grows a weird fleshy protuberance, a phallus, perhaps. This thing blossoms over a very unlucky woman’s mouth, and impregnates her. When this woman awakes, she has dried slime and blood caked around her lips, and she’s full-term pregnant. Then the really disgusting birthing sequence begins. She passes through her uterus a full-grown man, who resembles Tony’s father, Sam. This alien in human guise chews through his umbilical cord and continues on his way.

Later, Sam passes on his alien heritage to his son. Again coupling sex with gore, he kisses his boy on the shoulder. Actually sucks his shoulder, to more accurate. Since he's the boy's father, this is gross and disturbing and disgusting in all kinds of ways.

Even the lovely Analise, played by Maryam D'Abo, is not immune to the sexual overtones in the film. Tony passes on the alien "gift" to her, and strange organisms come to inhabit her body. Too bad.

At the end of the film, Sam is out of time and his human body starts to decompose after making love to Rachel. Green slime spreads across his face and torso, and once more sex is depicted as something rather disturbing and unhealthy. David Cronenberg treads in this territory all the time, where the body is corruptible and we should fear our own fluids, but *X-tro* doesn't seem to have an overriding theme. It's kinky, there's lots of sex, but what's the point? Don't mate with aliens?

One of the aspects of the film that doesn't work is a strange subplot involving fantasies come true. After being given alien form, Tony—a heretofore nice (if traumatized) boy—decides to conjure living toys that kill people he dislikes. First, he materializes a friggin' clown, and the phantasm is absolutely terrifying. Then, he makes real a toy soldier, and sends the officer (who has a plastic molded face, but is armed with a real gun) to blow away a neighbor.

None of this seems to fit with the main plot, about Tony's dad returning to Earth to claim his son. Nor does it in any way relate to the movie's obsession with depicting sex as gruesome, slimy and unhealthy.

Still, it's one gross movie.

LEGACY: *X-tro* spawned two sequels, *X-tro 2: The Second Encounter* (1990) and *X-tro 3: Watch the Skies* (1995).

1984

January 1: The monopoly known as “Ma Bell” (“the phone company”) gets busted by Department of Justice, anti-trust attorney William Baxter and Judge Harold Greene, paving the way for the age of Sprint, MCI and other long-distance carriers.

January 9: Wendy’s Restaurant airs the first “Where’s the Beef” commercial featuring cantankerous old lady, Clara Peller, who quickly becomes a pop culture icon. Her popular refrain is even utilized (by democratic candidate Walter Mondale) during a presidential debate.

January 23: Pop star Michael Jackson is injured (his scalp seared) while filming a Pepsi commercial.

February 16: In a White House meeting with Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, President Reagan claims to have photographed Nazi atrocities while in the Signal Corps during World War II. He never served overseas in World War II.

March 24: Donald Rumsfeld again visits personally with Saddam Hussein of Iraq. His trip coincides with the release of a United Nations report condemning the dictator for using deadly nerve and mustard gas on Iranian troops. President Reagan calls for a ban on chemical weapons in April.

March 30: Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous hosted by Robin Leach, bows on TV.

June 8: Ghostbusters starring Dan Aykroyd and Bill Murray becomes the monster hit of the summer. The theme song by Ray Parker Jr. is a top 40 hit.

June 18: Bruce “The Boss” Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” reaches the top of the Billboard charts, where it remains for more than a year. Most people (including some in Reagan’s administration) misunderstand the song, thinking it’s a pro-America anthem.

July 23: Vanessa Williams, the first Black Miss America, returns her crown after nude photos are published by Penthouse magazine.

August 11: Testing a microphone before a speech, President Reagan announces his plan to “outlaw” Russia forever. “Bombing,” he quips, begins in “five minutes.”

August 25: Author Truman Capote dies from an overdose of barbiturates.

September 15: Diana gives birth to the son of Prince Charles, Prince Harry.

The Black Room

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stephen Knight (Jason); Cassandra Gaviola (Bridget); Jimmy Stathis (Larry); Clara Perryman (Robin); Charlie Young (Man); Geanne Frank (Sandy); Linnea Quigley (Milly); Christopher McDonald (Terry); Allburn Hale (Jenny); Bill Angelmyer (Mark); Sheila Reid (Female Lover).

CREW: Lancer Productions presents a Butler-Cronin Production. *Executive Producer:* D.P. Cronin. *Associate Producer:* Ami Amir. *Music:* Art Podell, James Ackley. *Producer:* Aaron C. Butler. *Film Editor:* David Kern. *Director of Photography:* Robert Harmon. *Steadicam Operator:* Andrew Mart. *Produced by:* Aaron C. Butler. *Directed by:* Elly Kenner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: “The most beautiful thing in the world is to be killed by someone you love.”—A strange sentiment expressed in *The Black Room*.

SYNOPSIS: Frustrated suburbanite Larry (Stathis) is bothered by his family's near-constant interruptions when he tries to get intimate with his wife, Robin (Perryman). In hopes of spicing up his sex life, he rents a room in a house in the Hollywood Hills for \$200 a month. There, he meets Bridget (Gaviola) and her emaciated, sickly brother, Jason (Knight), who promise to prepare his love nest—a black room—with lit candles and bottles of champagne, provided they can watch his sex acts. Larry agrees and begins bringing young, hot-to-trot women back to the house, unaware that after he finishes with them, the ghoulish brother-and-sister are abducting the lovers to drain their blood and transfuse Jason, who suffers from a rare—and fatal—blood disease.

Meanwhile, an angry Robin learns of her husband's infidelity and decides to try out the black room for herself, hooking up with a hunky student (McDonald) at a nearby university. Unfortunately, Jason and Bridget decide that they like Larry and Robin so much, that they should stay with them. They then determine to abduct and drain the blood from their children.

COMMENTARY: Some of the best horror films of the 1980s are precautionary tales, stories in which married people step out of accepted societal mores (usually involving sex) only to see their families threatened by their irresponsible actions. *Fatal Attraction* (1987) is probably the most notorious precautionary film about marital transgressions, but the low-budget (and mostly underlit) *The Black Room* is an earlier and not ineffective variation on the same topic. Like the popular *Fatal Attraction*, this movie revolves around a man's sexual appetite and infidelity, a transgression that could have fearsome results, and even rip a family apart.

In real life, the consequences of illicit sex can be either pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, but horror films like *The Black Room* take that equation one step further: The act of loving outside matrimonial bonds results in horror and death. Here, the women who visit the black room to engage in sexual intercourse with Larry see their precious bodily fluids drained from their bodies, a gory procedure involving blood-spurting needles and the like. Reiterating the conservative nature of the decade, *The Black Room* makes the explicit connection between bad social behavior (promiscuous sex) and disease. It's no accident that the women who sleep with Larry end up badly. The movie sees them as being deserving of the punishment. "The world is full of married men. I'd starve without 'em," one lover says before losing her blood to Jason. What's interesting is that the film seems to understand, fairly early in the age of AIDS, the "loaded" nature of hypodermic needles and the danger of contaminated blood in transfusions, two ways of acquiring HIV. Here the sex doesn't directly lead to disease (and hence death), but the sex does lead one to the den of horror, and the result is the same.

The Black Room also plays a nasty trick on the misbehaving husband. His wife, who also feels unfulfilled by their sex life, turns the tables on him by visiting the black room herself. "I don't want to be your wife when we make love," Robin complains—acknowledging that women are sexual creatures as much as men are. "I want to be a whore."

When Larry catches on, he gets very angry. He can't countenance the idea of his wife (and the mother of his children) engaging in casual sex, and so he agrees to give up the fantasy love nest. But it's clear Robin has won this round. By raising the stakes, she has forced Larry back into monogamy.

Unfortunately, both Larry and Robin did step out on each other, and their punishment, meted out by the movie's villainous Bonnie & Clyde couple, Jason and Bridget, is to see their children jeopardized. The

metaphor is all too clear: Step out of “safe” husband-and-wife roles, and your children, your life, everything is endangered.

At times, *The Black Room* is edited with less than a full degree of clarity, and in some senses it feels like a holdover from the grindhouse days of the 1970s. There’s a Manson Family quality about the killers, and overall, it’s quite kinky, particularly the sequence wherein Bridget and Larry make love, and she takes on the role of a matador and rides her lover like a bull. Ultimately, however, *The Black Room* captures perfectly the ideals of a conservative era, particularly the belief that “personal” choices about adultery whiplash and have grave repercussion for whole family units, both in terms of health (i.e., disease) and survival.

Blind Date

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Joseph Bottoms (Jonathan Ratcliff); Kirstie Alley (Claire Simpson); James Daughton (Dave); Lana Clarkson (Rachel); Keir Dullea (Dr. Steiger); Michael Howe, Gerald Kelly, Jerry Sandquist (Subway Gang); Marina Sirtis (Hooker); Kathy Hill (Murdered Woman); Noelle Simpson (Final Victim); Antigone Amanetis (First Victim); Ankie Grelson (Rachel’s Friend); Louis Sheldon (Murdered Man).

CREW: Omega Pictures in Association with Wescom Productions presents a Nico Mastorakis film. *Associate Producers:* J.D. Corinis, Michael Rich. *Production Designer:* Anne-Marie Papedlis. *Director of Photography:* Andrew Bellis. *Film Editor:* George Rosenberg. *Music:* Stanley Myers. *Original Songs:* John Kongos. *Executive Producer:* D.T. Skouras. *Story:* Nico Mastorakis. *Screenplay by:* Nico Mastorakis, Fred C. Perry. *Produced and Directed by:* Nico Mastorakis. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Greece, a serial killer dresses up like a surgeon and carves up women with a scalpel. Meanwhile, an American ad man, Jonathan (Bottoms) is blinded during an accident in the park. After a humiliating beating at a train station by three thugs, Jonathan goes to an eye specialist, Dr. Steiger (Dullea), to receive an experimental “vision computer,” a sonar-like device that can transmit visual information to his brain, even if only in primitive line patterns.

Jonathan hooks up the device to his Atari 2600 game system and plugs Super Break Out right into his brain. He passes out from the overstimulation, but the act triggers subconscious memories that lead him to remember the identity of the surgical serial killer. Though his girlfriend Claire (Alley) is slow to believe him, Jonathan thinks he even knows who the next victim may be: a beautiful model named Rachel (Clarkson). Jonathan proceeds to set up a trap to expose the killer and plots to use his blindness to his advantage.

COMMENTARY: In the age of X-Box, GameCube and Playstation 2, it's difficult for the horror-thriller *Blind Date* not to appear extremely silly, since it posits a "futuristic" vision computer for a blind man that—all joking aside—intentionally resembles the antiquated graphics from the Atari 2600 home video computer system (*more games! more fun!*). This advanced computer is battery-operated (!) and housed in another 1980s anachronism: the Sony Walkman.

During one scene certain to garner laughs, the film's hero, played by Joseph Bottoms, actually wires Atari Super Break Out right into his brain and starts tripping out on the resulting "digital" imagery. Given the use of an Atari cartridge as a hallucinogen, one has to wonder if this film had Atari's approval.

Still, despite touches that make the film less than successful today, the concept of a blind protagonist facing off with a serial killer has been utilized successfully many times in the horror genre (*See No Evil* [1971]). Yet in the 1980s, the "blind leading the blind" cliché was trotted out not so successfully (*Blind Fear* [1989]) ... and *Blind Date* is another example of the latter.

Part of the problem is that the film meanders. *Blind Date* can't decide it wants to be about (a) an "amazing" new technology for the blind; (b) a man obsessed with a former girlfriend or (c) the hunt for a serial killer who performs surgery on his victims. The last subplot is clearly the most interesting and some of the attack scenes in the film are well-staged.

Although a few of these horror sequences in *Blind Date* are quite dramatic, particularly a scene in which Jonathan is chased up to a roof on a small ledge in front of a neon sign but doesn't realize his plight because the machine is turned off, others merely raise questions about the director's intent. For instance, in the final scenes, the killer is garbed in a Speedo, and that simply doesn't work because it makes him appear vulnerable rather than menacing.

Perhaps the best audience for *Blind Date* is the curious *Star Trek* fan. This film features two *Star Trek* stars, Kirstie Alley (Lt. Saavik) and Marina Sirtis (Counselor Troi), in various stages of undress. Alley plays Jonathan's girlfriend and an early sex scene featuring her is interrupted in untimely fashion for a surprise birthday party.

Sirtis plays one of the “surgeon’s” victims. She strips down to reveal her breasts and, if nothing else, that makes the film an eye-opening experience. However, this actress (who appeared in a supporting role in the Oscar-nominated *Crash* [2005]) may not have been pleased with her exposure in *Blind Date* since the nudity stays in, but all of her dialogue is missing from the soundtrack.

Blood Kill

(a.k.a. *Rats: Night of Terror*)

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Richard Raymond (Kurt); Janna Ryann (Chocolate); Alex McBride (Taurus); Richard Cross (Video); Ann Gisel Glass (Myrna); Christopher Bretner (Lucifer); Tony Lombardo (Deus); Henry Luciani (Duke); Cindy Leadbetter (Diana); Chris Fremont (Noah); Moune Duvivier (Lilith).

CREW: *Presented by:* Beatrice Film and IMP.EX.CI. *Story by:* Bruno Mattei. *Screenplay by:* Claudio Fragasso, Herve Piccini. *Music:* Luigi Cecarelli. *Makeup:* Giuseppe Ferrante. *Co-Director:* Clyde Anderson. *Art Directors:* Maurizio Mammi, Charles Fimelli. *Film Editor:* Gilbert Kikione. *Director of Photography:* Franco Delli Colli. *Production Supervisor:* Sergio Cortono. *Directed by:* Vincent Dawn (a.k.a. Bruno Mattei). *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’m aware how intelligent these creatures are supposed to be, but they can’t be smarter than us.”—A man of the future has an existential crisis over smart rats, in *Blood Kill*.

SYNOPSIS: In the post-apocalyptic year A.D. 2240, a gang of roving “New Primitives” led by the sensitive Kurt (Raymond) take refuge in an old 20th century city, hoping to find provisions and shelter. What they discover is Delta 2 Computer Center, an outpost stocked with food including grain, sugar and flour, and plant-growing and water-purifying facilities.

Even as the disloyal Duke (Luciani) plots to overthrow Kurt's command, a new threat emerges: The city is teeming with intelligent, red-eyed rats that feed on human beings. After they slip out to have sex, Lucifer (Bretner) and Lilith (Duvivier) are their first victims. Kurt barricades the rest of his gang inside the computer center, but the rats pollute the water and keep finding their way inside. Deus (Lombard), the group philosopher and historian, notes that rats usually only fight against their own kind, and can smell outsiders by their "different urine," so this malicious rat behavior is odd, to say the least.

Duke makes his play for command and is killed by the rats. The last four survivors, including Chocolate (Ryann) and her would-be boyfriend Video (Cross), make a last stand in the computer room. Underdwellers from beneath the surface arrive just in time with gas weapons to kill the attacking rats. But these men aren't what they seem, as Chocolate and Video soon find out.

COMMENTARY: Get ready. It's 225 A.B. (After the Bomb), and the world is in tatters, so cue the cheesy synth-pop music!

Nuclear fears proliferated in the 1980s, especially after President Reagan's joke about outlawing and then bombing the Soviet Union. Another "grave and gathering" threat was the production of post-apocalyptic horror and science fiction films. From the popular *The Road Warrior* (1982) and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) to the less-satisfying *Parasite* (1983), *Creepozoids* (1985) and its kindred, genre filmmakers obsessed on the frightening imaginary world that "could be" if the globe's superpowers volleyed nuclear weapons.

One such meditation on the future came from Italy's Bruno Mattei, the auteur of *Hell of the Living Dead*. His film (arguably his masterpiece), released in America as *Blood Kill*, doesn't have a particularly promising premise for a post apocalyptic movie, and the production values needed to create a believable future world seem to elude Mattei.

The motorcycle gang protagonists consist of an interracial group of very thin-looking, wiry Europeans who all wear 20th century fashions. And not particularly attractive fashions. The leader, the entirely too introspective Kurt, dons a red scarf and what appears to be a sea captain's hat. Apparently, he missed the audition to join the Village People. Like many of the other men in the film, Kurt looks entirely too fey, and clean, to thrive in such a terrifying, anarchic world, let alone lead a gang of cut-throats. Kurt boasts a perfectly groomed and trimmed beard, and the ladies in the gang all evidence nicely shaven

legs. Sure, there's a smudge placed artfully here and there, on a cheek or forehead, but overall, one would expect the gang—short on supplies and living on the road—to look entirely more, well, *rugged*. There's one gang member here who even resembles Harpo Marx.

That established, I especially like the character of Deus. He wears a Mohawk, and yet seems to know more about history and philosophy than his companions. I see him as the Mr. Spock of this exceptionally stupid group.

Beyond the very funny appearance of the gang, it doesn't appear that director Mattei really planned out the details of this world very carefully. For instance, the protagonists all utilize flashlights in the film, but don't seem to understand that these devices operate on batteries. One character says of the rats, "Think of the diseases they could give us. Hepatitis! Meningitis!"

Which is it? Are these characters familiar with the remnants of our civilization (like diseases and flashlights), or naive dolts, a future breed not acquainted with what came before? That question is never satisfactorily answered.

Movies such as *Blood Kill* face a double-hurdle: They must not only create a post-apocalyptic world that is plausible and believable, but then they must make the film scary to boot. That's a challenge beyond this production's capability. *Blood Kill* never clears hurdle number one.

The "villains" in the film, the rats, don't provoke much terror. Which is strange thing to admit, because utilized well (in films such as *Of Unknown Origin* [1983] and *Nightmares* [1983], for instance), rats can prove quite menacing. Yet here, the rats seem lethargic (and are portrayed by fat guinea pigs). At times, it is clear that the animals have simply been dumped onto actors, or tossed into the shot. In at least one instance, the "rats" are placed on a rug or a conveyer belt of some type, a "horror" treadmill of sorts, and simply dragged through the frame, which is an hysterically funny effect.

In a not-entirely-successful effort to cover up the real nature of these apparently sedate animals, *Blood Kill* periodically cuts to a special P.O.V. perspective: Rat-o-vision. The audience sees everything the rats see ... only the world is seen through an ominous red filter.

Had *Blood Kill* been a fast-paced, high-tension effort, perhaps none of this would have mattered. Instead, the gang members simply spend

most of the film arguing with one another and going back and forth between rooms in a facility that is part computer center, part laboratory, part pub, part hotel, and part supply depot. The best way to pass the boredom of this lackluster siege is simply to count the number of times the camera nonsensically zooms in on some unmoving object, like a window.

Blood Kill remains unintentionally funny because so much of the dialogue involves comparing the relative intelligence of rats and this group of humans, and it's all spoken with utter solemnity. "They have proved to be a dangerous enemy," warns a grave scientist in one scene, referring to rats. "They're stronger than us," Kurt declares with resignation at another point, surrendering to the inevitable fact that a rodent possesses a higher I.Q. than he.

"You mustn't talk that way, Kurt," replies a friend. "Those are negative thoughts!"

Indeed they are. But Kurt is just being realistic. You know you're in trouble when you've been outsmarted by the vermin.

And don't even get me started about the surprise ending; one which attempts to out-do the Statue of Liberty closing of the original *Planet of the Apes*. Like the remainder of *Blood Kill*, the conclusion falls just a wee bit short of that model.

Rats!

Blood Simple



Critical Reception

"It's a bloody mini-masterpiece. Not since Orson Welles bucked out of the chute with *Citizen Kane* did we see a debut film as confident as this one ... the double cross is deliciously acted, but deftly lighted (if only by a bug zapper or blazing incinerator) and sparely, creatively scored."—Jane Summer, "*Blood Simple*," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 12, 2000.

"What makes the movie unusual is that the Coen's let the audience in on things the characters don't know. The second half of the film takes on a slightly farcical tone, because the characters continually misunderstand and misinterpret each other's actions, and those

mistakes snowball into a pile of corpses..."—Rene Rodriguez, "Blood Simple," *The Miami Herald*, August 9, 2000.

"This film contains the double-crossing and moral complexity that make every Coen Brothers effort worthwhile. True to form, all the loose ends aren't tied up, but the viewer is left with a deeper, darker understanding of the human spirit."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Getz (Ray); Frances McDormand (Abby); Dan Hedaya (Marty); Samm Art Williams (Maurice); M. Emmet Walsh (Private Detective); Deborah Neumann (Debra); Holly Hunter (Voice on Answering Machine); Van Brooks (Man from Lubbock).

CREW: A River Road Production. *Directed by:* Joel Coen. *Produced by:* Ethan Coen. *Written by:* Joel and Ethan Coen. *Executive Producer:* Joel F. Bacaner. *Associate Producer:* Mark Silverman. *Director of Photography:* Barry Sonnenfeld. *Production Design:* Jane Musky. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An obsessive Texas bar owner named Marty (Hedaya) hires a private detective (Walsh) to murder his cheating wife, Abby (McDormand), who is having an affair with his bartender, Ray (Getz). But the detective has a double-cross in mind and uses Abby's gun to murder Marty instead, making off with \$10,000 from Marty's coffers. But he leaves behind a critical piece of evidence. Meanwhile, Ray discovers Marty's body and assumes that Abby has committed the crime. He drives out to a barren field to bury the body, but Marty isn't quite dead yet.

COMMENTARY: The Coen Brothers' debut film, the *film noir* *Blood Simple*, feels like a shot of adrenalin administered directly to the heart. It is so tightly structured, so gruesome and so over-the-top gory that the viewer is pinned down in a ninety-minute vise of tension and extreme unease. Although it skillfully charts the points of a redneck love triangle, *Blood Simple* really treads on much simpler and more fertile ground. People die in this film for one reason and one reason alone: faulty assumptions. They just don't talk to each other.

John Getz plays Ray, one point on that aforementioned love triangle and perhaps the most naive. He's in love with the beautiful Abby (Frances McDormand), Marty's wife. When Ray goes to Marty's sleazy out-of-the-way bar to bargain for Abby's freedom, he finds Marty there, already dead on the floor.

Or so it appears.

Ray immediately assumes that the love of his life, Abby, has killed her husband, and so sets immediately about the business of covering up the crime, thus actually *inserting* himself into the crime. He doesn't stop to imagine that there could be another killer. And there is: The film's Loki character, a seedy detective and force of chaos played by M. Emmet Walsh. Notice that flies always seem to be constantly buzzing around this guy.

Ray imagines he needs to protect Abby. He drives out to an empty field (bypassing a convenient incinerator) in the middle of the night and digs a hole. Only Ray's made another a bad assumption. Marty is still alive, so now Ray has to kill him, burying him alive. Now Ray has committed murder.

On and on this circus of faulty assumptions goes. Marty incorrectly assumes that Ray and Abby are dead, after hiring the detective to assassinate them. And Abby thinks Ray killed Marty, which technically he did.

The film's dialogue edges around these assumptions, and the truth is never discovered. "Ray, just tell me what happened?" Abby demands. Ray responds cryptically, "We both did it for each other."

These people *really* need to communicate better...

In charting the downfalls of these not terribly bright characters, the Coen brothers find plenty of opportunity to tread into horror territory and some powerful imagery. Early on, they adopt a Raimi-style shaky-cam stance. Later, they include a ghoulish scene in with Ray tries to clean his soiled car (where Marty's body was stowed) but the blood has soaked through a blanket on his back seat, and—like a scene from *Macbeth*—just won't come clean.

Then there's a terrible jolt when another prominent character dies unexpectedly in mid-sentence, blown away by a shotgun blast from a distance.

Finally, the best (and goriest moment) in *Blood Simple* finds a beleaguered and pursued Abby fighting back. She reaches through a window and jams a nasty-looking hunting knife right down through M. Emmet Walsh's hand as he stands on a ledge. In the grip of terrible pain, the detective starts shooting his gun blindly, attempting to break down the wall to free his pinned hand. The Coens linger on views of his impaled, ruined limb as Walsh removes the knife ever so slowly.

After the detective escapes this trap, Abby blows him away with one clean shot. He dies on the floor laughing, gazing up at the underside of a dripping sink.

Why's he laughing? Because of a faulty assumption. Abby shot him because she thought he was Marty.

Body Double



Critical Reception

“[T]he most unbearably cruel of De Palma’s Hitch rips. [T]he notorious scene of a helpless woman (Deborah Shelton) getting power-drilled to death is too viciously gloating to forgive. Call it general misanthropy or specific misogyny, this just ain’t a nice place to visit.”—Ty Burr, “*Body Double*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 15, 1993, pages 56–57.

“De Palma shows us his usual technical skill in stringing these tidbits together, and contributes some wholly original moments ... But the whole thing is basically a gag to De Palma—and that’s a bad problem in light of the sleazy material he’s peddling, which feeds largely on a vision of women as objects to be ogled or butchered.”—David Sterritt, “De Palma’s *Body Double*; sometimes striking; basically second rate,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 1984, page 52.

“[A] witty, chilly, campy and surprisingly intelligent entertainment. Its success is due, first of all, to De Palma’s clearly ironic intent: it is a movie about Hollywood, *about* the culture of sex and violence rather than about the awful events of the plot.”—Andrew Kopkind, *The Nation*, November 24, 1984, page 562.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Craig Wasson (Jake Scully); Gregg Henry (Sam Bouchard); Melanie Griffith (Holly Body); Deborah Shelton (Gloria Revelle); Guy Boyd (Detective Jim McClean); David Haskell (Drama Teacher); Dennis Franz (Rubin); Al Israel (Corso); Rebecca Stanley (Kimberly); Douglas Warhit (Video Salesman); Lane Davies (Billy); Barbara Crampton (Carol).

CREW: *Presented by:* Brian De Palma. *Music by:* Pino Donaggio. *Conducted by:* Natale Massara. *Casting by:* Janet Hirshenson, Jane

Jenkins. *Costume Designer*: Gloria Gresham. *Film Editors*: Jerry Greenberg, Bill Pankow. *Production Designer*: Ida Random. *Director of Photography*: Stephen H. Burum. *Executive Producer*: Howard Gottfried. *Screenplay by*: Robert J. Avrech, Brian De Palma. *Story by*: Brian De Palma. *Produced and Directed by*: Brian De Palma. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jake Scully (Wasson) is a struggling actor having a bad day: He's had a claustrophobic panic attack on the set of his new low-budget flick, *Vampire's Kiss*, and the director (Rubin) plans to fire him. Worse, when he returns to his apartment he finds his long-time girlfriend in bed with another man. Scully begins to drink again, but struggles with his claustrophobia and apartment hunting. Fortunately, an actor acquaintance, Sam Bouchard (Henry), suggests that Scully watch the place he is sub-letting, a futuristic home (it looks like a UFO) overlooking the Hollywood Hills.

Inside the home, Scully watches through a telescope as a beautiful neighbor dances topless every night. Scully becomes obsessed with this woman, Gloria Revelle (Shelton), and begins to follow her, even as a strange Indian man means to do her harm. Scully is too late to save Gloria from being murdered. Despondent, Scully later recognizes something familiar in the seductive dance of a porno star, Holly Body (Griffith), and realizes that he's been set up to be the perfect patsy, a witness to a crime ... so that the real culprit can go scot-free for the murder of his wife.

COMMENTARY: In *Body Double*, formalist Brian De Palma has crafted a thriller about the gulf between illusion and reality. But the artist's gone one step further than that too: He's set his murder mystery and noir in the land of illusions itself, Hollywood.

"You can't believe everything you see," shouted *Body Double*'s tag line, and that thought is also the film's mantra. What is detected and what is real almost never match up. The film's title *Body Double* is an indication of this, because a body double is a visual cheat, a substitute for a real actor or actress. For example, when the lyrical camera smoothly pans down to Angie Dickinson's torso in *Dressed to Kill*, there's an almost-invisible cut and suddenly the audience is actually gazing not upon the star's breasts, but those belonging to a twenty-five-year old double.

See how you can't trust your eyes?

The film obsesses on that notion as the wormy lead character, an actor

named Jack Scully (played by Craig Wasson), house-sits for a new friend. In these new digs, Jack spies a dancer in a distant apartment. She performs a sexy strip tease, thus drawing his attention, in a hypnotic sequence with masterful camera work.

Jake watches her every night, and when he sees this gorgeous woman murdered by a hulking Indian (armed with a phallic electric drill), he realizes he's the perfect alibi. He's been set up as the perfect witness to a crime. When he spots the same dance that drew him in originally, he follows the dancer to a porno film shoot. Turns out she was paid to "double" that wealthy woman, and lure Jake into the crime. Jake, pretending to be a porno actor (another illusion), attempts to romance her. De Palma stages a film shoot like a music video to the strains of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Relax," a mesmerizing, riveting and funny interlude that ends—horrors of horrors—without a money shot.

Body Double echoes Hitchcock's *Rear Window* in its tale of voyeurism, but everything doesn't gel here quite as seamlessly as in *Dressed to Kill*. That 1980 film is icy perfection, a sleek technical accomplishment. By contrast, moments in *Body Double* feel cheesy and badly staged, even occasionally sloppy. Virtually all of the process (rear-projection) work is terrible, and Jake's Persian flaw—*his paralysis*—makes him a weak character to spend so much time with.

As always, De Palma manages to orchestrate stunningly beautiful and elaborate long takes, but one feels that he's just marking time. The film ends on a kind of B-movie, jokey note and so *Body Double* ends up feeling like a lark, instead of a mesmerizing thriller.

Children of the Corn

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Horton (Burt); Linda Hamilton (Vicky); R.G. Armstrong (Diehl); John Franklin (Isaac); Courtney Gains (Malachai); Robby Kiger (Job); Anne Marie McEvoy (Sarah); Julie Maddalena (Rachel); Jonas Marlowe (Joseph); John Philbin (Amos); Dan Snook (Boy); David Cowen (Dad); Suzy Southam (Mom); D.G. Johnson (Mr. Hansen); Mitch Carter (Radio Preacher).

CREW: In association with Angelos Entertainment Group, Inc./Inverness Productions Inc., Hal Roach Studios and New World Pictures present a Gatlin Production. *Casting:* Linda Francis. *Music:* Jonathan

Elias. Art Director: Craig Stearns. Film Editor: Harry Keramidas. Director of Photography: Raoul Loam. Special Visual Effects: Max W. Anderson. Executive Producers: Earl Glick, Charles J. Weber. Based on a short story by: Stephen King. Screenplay by: George Goldsmith. Produced by: Donald P. Borchers, Terence Kirby. Stunt Coordinator: Kerrie Cullen. Special Effects: Special Effects Inc., Eric Rumsey. Directed by: Fritz Kiersch. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 92 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Any religion without love and compassion is false. It’s a lie.”—Burt tries to reason with the children of Gatlin, in *Children of the Corn*.

SYNOPSIS: In the corn-growing town of Gatlin, Nebraska—which doesn’t appear on regional maps—the town’s children launch a bloody insurrection and murder all the grown-ups. Three years later, a couple on a road trip, Burt (Horton) and Vicky (Hamilton), are detoured to Gatlin after accidentally hitting a child darting out of a roadside corn field. Examining his body, they realized his throat had been cut, and attempt to alert the police.

What they find in Gatlin, however, is a ghost town. With the adults gone, a boy with “sight” named Isaac (Franklin) and his brutal red-haired enforcer, Malachai (Gains) lord it over the other children with the strange worship of a deity called “He Who Walks Behind the Rows.”

Vicky is captured by Malachai and prepared for sacrifice on a crucifix in the corn yards. Aided by a little girl named Sarah (McEvoy) and her brother, Job (Kiger), Burt races to rescue Vicky, unaware that the threat he faces in the corn field is not the product of a maniacal child’s imagination, but a genuine force of evil. Freeing Vicky and the children from the hands of Malachai and Isaac, Burt sets out to burn the corn field and the strange forces that exist there.

COMMENTARY: In *Children of the Corn*, a nice young couple wanders into a ghost town and makes obvious declarations like “There’s something very strange about this town.” They soon confront evil children who bark orders like “Seize her,” as though they’re Roman consuls running their own personal fiefdom. Sound like an episode of the Comedy Central animated series *South Park* to you?

Actually, *South Park* did remake *Children of the Corn* (with a little of the *Star Trek* episode “Miri” thrown in for good measure) early in its run. That’s probably *not* a testimonial to *Children of the Corn*’s effectiveness as a horror film, only an acknowledgment that people

tend to remember horror movies in which the children are evil villains. Actually, it was a big thing in the 1970s, what with *The Omen* (1976) and such.

A middling film bolstered by some lovely shots of skies and corn fields, *Children of the Corn* puts its best foot forward with a bloody prologue. The children of Gatlin kill all their parents, setting the tone for the rest of the film. From there, the film adopts the “road trip gone wrong” template of 1970s horrors such as *Brotherhood of Satan* (1971) and introduces the outsiders, played by Linda Hamilton and Peter Horton, to the mix. At first the film seems to be going in a sociological *Lord of the Flies* direction, with the children mirroring the adult world and creating a barbarous society. Just like their parents, they use religion to confuse and separate one another and hold onto power. Brute force is championed through the character of Malachai.

Before long, however, the film (based on a short story by Stephen King) takes an odd supernatural turn and it is revealed that the children’s false god isn’t so fake after all.

On the contrary, some kind of twisted monster exists in the cornfield and roils the Earth upon its arrival (like the graboids in the 1990 hit *Tremors*). The adults change their strategy from one of schooling the children to something more action-packed. They burn down the cornfield and destroy He Who Walks Behind the Rows, apparently the first giant groundhog in history (though the film never reveals him). The finale is a special effects show with fire in the sky and pink clouds.

Children of the Corn is a seriously confused movie that just never comes together. When I saw it in the 1980s as a teenager, I found it gory and unsettling, but now time seems to have passed it by. It’s dull and muddled, and characters continually do stupid things, like split up in the face of impending danger. Horton and Hamilton do their best in thankless, undistinguished parts, though Hamilton’s performance never quite recovers from the embarrassing serenade she sings to Horton while he’s in bed. Also to the good: The scene in which a fleeing child is struck by Horton’s car looks frighteningly authentic. The moment in which the children chase Horton through town is also strangely effective, as mean-looking sickle-wielding kids descend on him from all corners. The scene raises goose bumps.

But how did the children find out about the monster? How does the monster speak through Isaac? What does it gain by their worship? Did the parents know about the monster? Basically, the problem is simply

that the monster isn't explained by anything in the movie, and if it boasts corporeality, burrowing through the earth, how does it manage the trick of parting the corn (like the Red Sea) for the kids? Is this a god, or a bole weevil?

Children of the Corn probably would have been a better movie if it was more like *Lord of the Flies*, a sociological study about what children do in the absence of adults and adult law, rather than taking that u-turn and becoming a supernatural horror flick.

LEGACY: *Children of the Corn* is the franchise that won't stop giving. Even if we ask nicely. There have been six sequels, many of them released directly to the home video market. The titles are: *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* (1993), *Children of the Corn III* (1995), *Children of the Corn IV: The Gathering* (1996), *Children of the Corn V: The Gathering* (1998), *Children of the Corn 666: Isaac's Return*, and *Children of the Corn: Revelation* (2001). Stephen King, the progenitor of this material, has presumably been rewarded with large royalty checks for the use of his title. As for the rest of us? Not so much.

C.H.U.D.

★ ★

Critical Reception

"I tend to be impressed by horror films with a social agenda, and this one has several. *C.H.U.D.* is essentially a bad monster movie, but it's also an engaging satire on corrupt government, radioactive waste disposal and the early '80s epidemic of homelessness in New York City. Think of it as *Them!* updated for post-Watergate yuppies. This film is the primary source for an enduring urban legend about 'mole people' living in abandoned subway tunnels (presumably, they eat all of those overgrown pet alligators living in the sewers). The title even serves as a punchline in Marc Singer's recent documentary *Dark Days*, about the real homeless communities beneath the streets of New York. With so much subtext to chew on, can anyone say 'remake'?"—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

"A terrible title and an unlikely alliance of CHUD-hunters doom this one from the start."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Heard (George Cooper); Daniel Stern (The Reverend Shepherd); Christopher Curry (Captain Bosch); Laurie Mattos (Flora Bosch); Kim Greist (Lauren Daniels); Justin Hall (Justin); Michael O'Hare (Fuller); Cordis Heard (Sanderson); Vic Polizos (Hayes); Eddie Jones (Chief O'Brien); Ruth Malaczek (Mrs. Monroe); J.C. Quinn (Murphy); Patricia Richardson (Ad Woman); Graham Beckel (Val); Gene O'Neill (Jackson); William Joseph Raymond (Victor); Shana Lee Farrell (Cindy); John Ramsey (Commissioner); George Martin (Wilson); Frankie R. Faison (Parker); John Goodman, Jay Thomas (Cops in Diner); Jon Polito (Newscaster).

CREW: *Presented by:* Andrew Bonime. *In charge of production:* Robert Bordiga. *Music Composed and Performed by:* Cooper Hughes. *Production Design:* William Blowit. *Costume Designer:* Jennifer Lax. *Casting:* Bonnie Timmerman. *Film Editor:* Claire Simpson. *Director of Photography:* Peter Stern. *Executive Producer:* Larry Abrams. *Screenplay:* Parnell Hall. *Story:* Shepard Abbott. *Produced by:* Andrew Bonime. *Special C.H.U.D. Makeup created by:* John Caglione, Jr. *C.H.U.D. Design Concepts:* Tim Boxell. *Stunt Coordinator:* Harry Madsen. *Directed by:* Douglas Cheek. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You guys wouldn’t know the truth if it came up and bit you!”—A prophetic remark in *C.H.U.D.*

SYNOPSIS: The Reverend Shepherd (Stern), who runs a soup kitchen for the homeless in New York City, reports to NYPD Captain Bosch (Curry) that a dozen or so of the local “undergrounders” who live in the sewers have disappeared. At the same time, a bag lady leads photographer George Cooper (Heard) beneath the city into a series of tunnels and shows him her wounded compatriot, Victor (Raymond), who claims to have been bitten by some kind of subterranean monster.

Bosch’s wife has also disappeared mysteriously. He and the reverend take their case to the city government, Chief O’Brien (Jones) and a representative of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Jackson (O’Neill), and learn that the departments are masterminding a cover-up about something called C.H.U.D.: Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers.

When the toxic-waste-forged beasts venture into the city and massacre a diner full of patrons and two cops (Goodman, Thomas), the lid is blown off the conspiracy. A murderous C.H.U.D. breaks into the apartment of George’s pregnant girlfriend, Lauren (Greist). When George and the reverend are trapped in the sewers with the drooling

monsters, it's up to Bosch to expose Jackson and reveal to the city the truth about C.H.U.D.

COMMENTARY: *C.H.U.D.* is a legendary low-budget movie with a cult reputation, but disappointingly, it still isn't a very good film. It's not nearly as much raunchy fun as the politically incorrect monster movie *Humanoids from the Deep* (1980), for example, to which it bears some borderline resemblance. To be truthful, *C.H.U.D.* is a dud: dull and plodding, despite its dynamite premise.

C.H.U.D.—like WMDs in Iraq—would appear to be a slam-dunk case. After all, the film is timely, and it makes explicit the “don’t worry be happy/be afraid, be very afraid” duality of American life in the 1980s. To wit, on the surface of New York City, everything seems fine and dandy. Look a little closer however, and there’s poverty and homeless people. Look even a *little* closer and go beneath the surface, and real horror dwells: cannibalistic humanoid underground dwellers created by toxic waste dumping (big business run amuck!). Disturbingly, the EPA and federal government know all about these monsters, but are engaging in a cover-up.

A social problem that isn’t being addressed (poverty), the adoption of a good urban legend (monsters underneath a city) and the notion that a controlled world built by man is no longer under his control, but dangerously evolved ... these elements would all seemingly guarantee a terrifically interesting monster movie. Again, that’s just not the case. The monsters look fake, the attacks aren’t that compelling (though there’s a lot of gore), and the film is slow as molasses.

On the upside, hover, the monsters do kill John Goodman and Jay Thomas.

LEGACY: A comedic, tongue-in-cheek, direct-to-video sequel, called *C.H.U.D. II: C.H.U.D. The Bud* landed on video store shelves in 1990.

Crimes of Passion

★ ★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kathleen Turner (China Blue/Joanna); Anthony Perkins (Reverend Peter Shayne); John Laughlin (Bobby Grady); Annie Potts (Amy Grady); Bruce Davison (Hopper); Louise Sorel (Claudia).

CREW: New World Presents a Donald P. Borchers Production of a Ken Russell Film. *Casting:* Linda Francis. *Music:* Rick Wakeman. *Director of Photography:* Dick Bush. *Film Editor:* Brian Tagg. *Art Director:* Steve Marsh. *Executive Producer:* Larry Thompson. *Co-Producer:* Donald P. Borchers. *Written and produced by:* Barry Sandler. *Directed by:* Ken Russell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Bored suburbanite Bobby (Laughlin), experiencing sexual problems at home with his wife Amy (Potts), is drawn into the strange orbit of a gorgeous businesswoman by day, hooker by night, China Blue (Turner). Intrigued and aroused, Bobby falls further and further into the world of the street, which also includes an insane preacher similarly obsessed with China, Reverend Peter Shayne (Perkins).

COMMENTARY: Perhaps the wild *Crimes of Passion* isn't technically a horror film, but the movie certainly qualifies as a walk on the dark side, and it comes directly from the stylish auspices of Ken Russell, the auteur behind *Altered States* (1980), *Gothic* (1987) and *Lair of the White Worm* (1988).

Perhaps more to the point, *Crimes of Passion* features an absolutely insane (dare I use the word psycho?) performance by Anthony Perkins as a Scripture-quoting, sex-obsessed street priest. Perhaps his presence will make the film of interest to genre enthusiasts, especially those who have enjoyed him in such eighties films as *Psycho II* (1983) and *Edge of Sanity* (1989).

Before the film is over, the crazed Perkins has attended peep shows, fondled a metallic dildo that looks like a missile, and memorably delivered over-the-top dialogue like "Strip ... bitch!" and "I am the messenger of God, you cocksucker." His deranged character is a strange combination of sad, sick and funny, at least until the reverend graduates to dangerous.

Outside of Perkins' character, who is forever lurking nearby, *Crimes of Passion* concerns a fascinating character beautifully crafted by 1980s superstar Kathleen Turner. China Blue is the name of this hooker, a persona created by Joanna in the film, and *Crimes of Passion* follows her along on many of her tricks, some of which are laughable (especially one involving Lady Liberty and the flute), and some of which are touching, as is the case with her journey to see a man who is dying and who wishes to feel like a man one last time.

Filmed in seedy shades of neon, *Crimes of Passion* is a *film noir* of sorts about a married man, Laughlin, who encounters the alluring China

Blue and falls for her. She's a fairly traditional *femme fatale*, an icy, ambitious, but beautiful designer who may also be an industry spy. As for the protagonist, Bobby's a pretty embarrassing character, one given to publicly re-telling a really bad joke about a penis, so perhaps it's no wonder his wife doesn't find him particularly erotic. However, even given a wimpy, unattractive lead, *Crimes of Passion* is alternately compelling and scary, as the mad reverend (a cross dresser who actually wants to *be* China Blue) leans ever closer to murderous action.

Don't Open Till Christmas

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Edmund Purdom (Inspector Harris); Alan Lake (Giles); Belinda Mayne (Kate); Gerry Sundquist (Cliff Boyd); Mark Jones (Powell); Kelly Baker (Experience Girl); Caroline Munro (Herself); Kevin Lloyd (Gerry); Wendy Danvers (Housekeeper); Nicholas Donnelly (Dr. Bridle); Pat Astley (Sharon); Lawrence Harrington (Kate's Father); Ricky Kennedy (Theater Santa); Sid Wragg (Dungeon Santa); Max Roman (Store Santa); George Piero (Market Santa); Ashley Dransfield (Drunken Santa); John Astoni (Car Santa); Maria Eldridge (Girl in Car).

CREW: *Presented by:* Dick Randall and Steve Minasian. *Director of Photography:* Alan Pudney. *Film Editor:* Ray Selfe. *Music:* Des Dolan. *Additional scenes Written and Directed by:* Al McGoohan. *Written by:* Derek Ford. *Produced by:* Dick Randall, Steve Minasian. *Directed by:* Edmund Purdom. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A lunatic is loose on the streets of London, killing anybody dressed as Santa Claus, and only "twenty-three killing days" remain until Christmas! Kate (Mayne), the mourning daughter of one slain Santa, tells Inspector Harris (Purdom) at New Scotland Yard that her father had no enemies, and she is cleared of involvement in the crime when a third Santa is killed. However, Kate's boyfriend Cliff (Sundquist) remains a prime suspect because he is also associated with another would-be victim, a model named Sharon (Astley). As more Santas are murdered, Harris receives a special holiday gift labeled with the legend "Don't open till Christmas."

COMMENTARY: Men dressed as Santa Claus are the victims in *Don't*

Open Till Christmas, yet another in the seemingly endless parade of holiday-themed slasher films. Differentiating this yuletide film from the pack ever so slightly is the fact that it's a most unwelcome import from England, one that immediately should be re-gifted.

The slasher paradigm is a basic template, and in adhering to it, *Don't Open Till Christmas* fails to offer much by way of surprises or innovation. There are red herrings aplenty, including Inspector Harris and Kate's boyfriend, Cliff, and the film suffers from a plethora of dull, repetitive P.O.V. heavy breathing stalk shots, now *de rigueur*.

One unkind cut features jolly St. Nick at a public men's room urinal as his little red-nosed reindeer gets chopped off. This moment of merciless penis-severing sounds much more interesting than it actually plays.

Don't Open Till Christmas also adopts the commonly utilized psychological motivation of a crime in the past as the reason behind a string of murders occurring in the present. Here, a flashback reveals that a little boy (who becomes the killer) witnessed his mother engaging in a sexual tryst with an abusive Santa. Mom ended up falling down the stairs, and that's apparently all the motivation one needs to despise the bearded one.

Unfortunately, *Don't Open Till Christmas* also includes an element featured in only the worst and most difficult-to-tolerate examples of the paradigm: a musical number! *Graduation Day*, *New Year's Evil* and now *Don't Open Till Christmas* all boast really lousy, full-length songs, but here, at least, the tune is performed by a personality beloved in the genre: the gorgeous Caroline Munro.

Because appearing in *Maniac* wasn't a low point enough, apparently.

Still, the film gets back to business quickly, when—during Munro's less-than-stellar musical stylings—a dead Santa steals her thunder by appearing on stage.

Don't Open Till Christmas is one of the dullest slasher pictures made in the 1980s, in part because it consists of almost nothing but a series of death sequences involving St. Nick. A Santa dies at a disco Christmas party; a Santa dies at a peep show; a Santa dies in a “dungeon” (don’t ask); and that very unfortunate Santa is killed at a urinal when his exposed member is sliced off with a razor knife.

“I hate Christmas,” says a character named Giles in the film. “I hate everything it stands for.”

Given a film of such low quality, one can't really blame Giles for his Scrooge-like sentiments. Watching this movie is like waking up Christmas morn to discover coal in your stocking. If one quickly peruses the credits listed above this entry, one may notice precisely who the Grinch is in this scenario. There's one very telling accreditation for "additional scenes written and directed by Al McGoohan."

This is the best indicator that *Don't Open Till Christmas* is a botched effort: Some producer attempted to salvage it by giving the audience more of what her or she thought it *really* wanted, more Santa murders! Alas, these numerous murder scenes, including one at the beginning involving a car and an alley, seem inserted into the film at random, and serve only as padding.

In the 1980s, Santa Claus had the good fortune to appear as both the killer (in *Silent Night Deadly Night* [1984]) and the victim in slasher films. As a result, one can imagine a pissed-off Kris Kringle checking out his list of who's been naughty and nice, and deciding to bypass everyone who had anything to do with *Don't Open Till Christmas*.

Bah humbug.

Dreamscape

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Boy, were my memories of this movie deceptive—I recalled a super cool sciffy adventure starring a cute guy second only to Harrison Ford as the hero of choice of the reveries of a teenaged girl geek. And when I re-watched it five minutes ago? Sure, Dennis Quaid is still adorable, if hilariously young, but sheesh: This is pretty lame. The FX are nice, but one dream-jumper saving the world? The desperate earnestness only contributes to the ridiculousness of it all. Man, I hope *Innerspace* isn't actually this boring."—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher* (www.flickfilosopher.com)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dennis Quaid (Alex Gardner); Max Von Sydow (Paul Novotny); Christopher Plummer (Bob Blair); Eddie Albert (The President); Kate Capshaw (Dr. Jane DeVries); David Patrick Kelly (Tommy Ray Glatman); George Wendt (Charlie Prince); Larry Gelman (Mr.

Webber); Cory “Bumper” Yothers (Buddy); Redmond Gleeson (Snead); Peter Jason (Babcock); Chris Mulkey (Finch); Jana Taylor (Mr. Webber); Madison Mason (Fred Schoenstein); Kendall Carly Browne (Mrs. Matusik); Kate Charleson (President’s Daughter); Eric Gold (Tommy Ray’s Father); Virginia Kiser (President’s Wife); Carl Strano (Edward Simms); Brian Libby (McClaren); Larry Cedar (The Snake Man).

CREW: *Presented by:* Bruce Cohn Curtis. *Director of Photography:* Brian Tufano. *Film Editor:* Richard Halsey. *Visual Effects:* Peter Kurau. *Special Makeup:* Craig Reardon. *Executive Producers:* Stanley R. Zupnik, Tom Curtis. *Co-Producer:* Jerry Tokofsky. *Music:* Maurice Jarre. *Story:* David Loughery. *Screenplay:* David Loughery, Chuck Russell, Joseph Ruben. *Producer:* Bruce Cohn Curtis. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Creative Consultant:* Alan Jones. *Costume Designer:* Linda M. Bass. *Associate Producer:* Chuck Russell. *Directed by:* Joseph Ruben. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Alex Gardner (Quaid), a gambler, small-time con man and low-grade psychic, is recruited by the U.S. government and his friend Dr. Novotny (Sydow) to work on a top-secret science project related to dreams and “dream linking.” At Thornhill College, under the supervision of Dr. Jane DeVrie (Capshaw), Alex is trained to psychically enter and then shape the dreams of psychologically traumatized patients, including a boy named Buddy (Yothers), who suffers from recurring nightmares about a monstrous Snake Man.

Bob Blair, head of government covert operations, sees the dream-linking capability as a military option, a way to enter the dreams of the enemy and kill them in their sleep, since if you die in a dream state, you die in reality too. He shapes another dream-linker, the psychotic murderer Tommy Ray (Kelly), to become a dream assassin.

When the president of the United States (Albert), suffering from dreams about a nuclear holocaust, threatens to concede to Russian demands at an upcoming peace summit in Geneva, hard-liner Blair realizes that Tommy Ray has his first target, and arranges for the president to stay at Thornhill College for treatment of his nightmare. Alex and Jane realize that the president’s life is in danger, and Alex enters the president’s nuclear nightmare to defend the chief executive from Ray’s murderous plans. Unfortunately, Ray has learned not just how to dream-link, but how to shape the reality of any dream to suit his fiendish desires and needs.

COMMENTARY: On November 23, 1983, ABC aired the TV-movie *The*

The Day After, directed by Nicholas Meyer. This touchstone film concerning a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was viewed by over a hundred million Americans. President Ronald Reagan was apparently one of those viewers, and according to some rumors, he even shed a tear or two afterwards.

Following the broadcast that night, a panel including Secretary of State George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Carl Sagan, and moderator Ted Koppel discussed the film and its implications. It was in this setting that Sagan reportedly introduced to the American populace the term “nuclear winter.” As if instant disintegration and bleeding orifices weren’t enough to terrify the populace about nuclear war...

One thing was for certain, following *The Day After*, Reagan pursued nuclear arms talks with the Russians aggressively. Sometimes, he even did so over the express objections of more conservative elements in his government. As the eighties passed, a rift grew between moderates who wanted to see more of Reagan’s negotiations and favored a diplomatic approach, and those arch-conservatives who feared their president would give away the nuclear store.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger represented the conservatives and wrote a letter in *The Washington Post* urging Reagan not to give up the bargaining chip of SDI (“Star Wars”) at the Geneva Summit with Gorbachev in November of 1985. Nicholas Meyer has gone on record claiming that he received a telegram from Reagan’s administration indicating how important *The Day After* was to the president’s eventual transition from “cold warrior” to crusader against global annihilation.

All of this history serves merely as prologue to a review of *Dreamscape*, an effects-heavy fantasy-horror film that—beneath its rubber-reality exterior—treads explicitly on the nuclear nightmares suffered by an avuncular U.S. president like Reagan, one who even spends time at a retreat (or is it ranch?) in California.

In the movie, this commander-in-chief is played by Eddie Albert ... as, essentially, Ronald Reagan. This chief executive’s apocalyptic nightmares become progressively worse and cause him to reconsider negotiating with the Russians. But—forecasting to some degree what would really happen in America in the years after *Dreamscape*’s release—an aggressive right-wing Secretary of Defense (Christopher Plummer) begins to fear that his president will emasculate the country’s nuclear deterrent. Plummer’s character initiates a plot to assassinate the president using a top secret “dream linking”

technology. To the best of my knowledge, Weinberger never attempted such a conspiracy.

Reflecting the country's pervasive nuclear fears in the 1980s, much of *Dreamscape* includes sojourns to the president's ruined, post-apocalyptic dream world. At the beginning of the film, a mushroom cloud and terrifying shock waves envelope Manhattan (the Twin Towers are even seen briefly). When the nightmare world is revisited later, the film lingers on several scarlet-hued images of a nuclear-scarred American landscape. "What did we do? What did you do?" childish voices cry out accusingly as the camera prowls a vivid bad-dream terrain where mutated, deformed children hide in a closet.



The president of the United States (Eddie Albert) dreams of a horrific “day after” post-nuclear landscape, while Dennis Quaid attempts to save his life from a nightmare assassin in *Dreamscape* (1984).

Even the final battle is waged in the dreamscape of the post-nuclear nightmare. Sitting on a slow-moving train, the chief executive surveys the damage he caused. Outside is rubble, chaos, anarchy and death. There are radioactive corpses-zombies on the train too, and even fierce dogs with blazing, radioactive eyes.

Whenever *Dreamscape* returns to this world, and this president's overriding terror concerning nuclear brinkmanship and the end of the world, the film not only mirrors its time to a substantial degree, but actually achieves a raw kind of cinematic power. Most Americans only hoped and prayed that Reagan too would evidence such a conscience, and see it as his responsibility to "lead the world back from the nuclear brink," as Albert declares. To his credit, Reagan did just that, and as Americans (and shepherds of Earth) we can all be grateful for his commitment to peace, and to the continuation of humanity.

Alas, the remainder of *Dreamscape* is a bit disappointing. The movie hasn't aged well, and much of the film feels like a generic mid-1980s action movie (including motor-bike stunts!) and is shot with no more distinguished a palette than the average TV program, which differentiates it from *Brainstorm* (1983) or *Altered States* (1980), both of which also dealt with scientific frontiers and how they could affect the future of the human race. Those films, however, are stylish, dazzling, even pioneering in effects and presentation.

Boasting a really terrible electronic score which was also indicative of the times, *Dreamscape* wastes time instead on facile psychology in some of its dream sequences, and then—when not vetting dreams—focuses on cheeky Dennis Quaid's Alex Gardner attempts to bed Kate Capshaw's ice princess scientist. In a film when the subject is stepping into somebody else's dreams, who cares about office romance?

Also, one can't but help recognize this film's resemblance to Wes Craven's seminal *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). There are three major commonalities. The first is that, as one character states in *Dreamscape*, "When you dream that you die, you die in life at the very same instant." Okay, that could be a coincidence. That idea is an urban legend, after all, isn't it?

But secondly, there's talk of Malaysian Dream people, and that dialogue feels ripped directly from young Johnny Depp's monologue to Heather Langenkamp before the climax of *Elm Street*. Thirdly, during the final battle on the president's train, the evil Tommy (David Patrick Kelly), the so-called "Neil Armstrong of dream linking," grows a set of finger knives, just like Freddy Krueger.

Also, as David Gerrold pointed out in a review in *Starlog* magazine at the time of its release, the film isn't consistent thematically. Basically, its thrust is that it's wrong to use dreams as a vehicle for assassination. But the last scene in the film involves Alex entering Christopher Plummer's dreams and killing him. That's hypocritical, isn't it? If

dream assassinations are wrong, then they're wrong for good guys and bad guys, and the movie should have made that point very clear.

Much of the imagery in *Dreamscape* is fascinating to dissect, particularly the Caligari-esque nightmare that introduces the scary, stop-motion Snake Man. There's a long staircase leading down into an abyss, lit only by flickering torch light, and this chaotic world feels surreal and genuinely frightening. But between such dream moments, and the acknowledgments of America's collective nightmare—a “winnable” nuclear war—*Dreamscape* remains a snore.

Firestarter

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Heh: Is it only me who finds the idea of Drew Barrymore as a destructive force of nature somewhat ironic in retrospect? Maybe a hint of the demons that would later cause her own personal crash-and-burn (which she’s bounced back from now) were already nagging at the corner of her mind when her nine-year-old self starred in this great flick (one of the better adaptations of a Stephen King novel). Barrymore is terrifying—and terrific—as a little kid struggling with forces beyond her control ... an apt metaphor for the fame and fortune and expectations that hounded her as a child star.”—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher*, (www.flickfilosopher.com)

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Keith (Andy McGee); Drew Barrymore (Charlie McGee); Freddie Jones (Dr. Joe Wallace); Heather Locklear (Vicky Tomlinson); Martin Sheen (Captain Hollister); George C. Scott (John Rainbird); Art Carney (Herb Manders); Louise Fletcher (Norma Manders); Moses Gunn (Dr. Herman Pynchot); Antonio Fargas (Taxi Driver); Drew Snyder (Orville Jamieson); Curtis Credel (Bates); Keith Colbert (Mayo); Richard Warlock (Knowles); Jeff Ramsey (Steinowitz); Jack Magner (Young Serviceman); Lisa Anne Barnes (Girlfriend).

CREW: *Presented by:* Dino De Laurentiis. *Music:* Tangerine Dream. *Film Editor:* David Rawlins. *Art Director:* Giorgio Postiglione. *Director of Photography:* Giuseppe Ruzzolini. *Associate Producer:* Martha Schumacher. *Based on the novel by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* Stanley Mann. *Produced by:* Frank Capra, Jr. *Directed by:* Mark L. Lester. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 115 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Burn it all down, baby!”—An invitation to the dance, in *Firestarter*.

SYNOPSIS: Andy McGee (Keith) and his young daughter Charlie (Barrymore) both possess powerful psychic abilities, and a top-secret government “Shop” wants them in custody for its own nefarious purposes. Because Charlie can start fires with her mind, the Shop considers her a potential weapon that can be trained for purposes of assassination and more. Andy is determined to see that she not suffer that fate, and flees with her to Tennessee, where the fugitives are taken in by kindly farmer Herb Manders (Carney) and his wife, Norma (Fletcher).

After Charlie fights off a squad of agents with her fire-starting ability, it’s time to move on again, this time to a remote cabin, but the perverted Shop assassin, an exterminator named John Rainbird (Scott), captures them and brings them back to his superior, Captain Hollister (Sheen). Andy and Charlie are separated and Andy’s powers of mental persuasion are kept suppressed with drugs while Charlie is trained to develop her powers. Rainbird pretends to be a kindly orderly and wins Charlie’s trust to gain her cooperation. But when Andy makes an escape attempt, and Charlie must choose between John the orderly and her dad, her loyalty remains with her father.

When Andy is shot, Charlie’s powers explode with a fiery rage, and she brings down the Shop, Rainbird and the rest in a conflagration of hatred and anger.

COMMENTARY: This film, yet another based on a literary effort of horror maestro Stephen King, isn’t nearly so bad as most critics would have had people believe back in 1984. Maybe the intelligentsia was suffering from King fatigue after 1983, the year of *Cujo*, *Christine* and *The Dead Zone*, or perhaps reviewers just wanted to bring the giant down a notch or two. *Firestarter* boasts a strong cast (including Martin Sheen and George C. Scott) and some amazing pyrotechnics that capture the awe and power of fire unleashed. On a rainy Saturday afternoon, those accomplishments are more than enough to earn the movie a positive if qualified recommendation.

Firestarter begins in *media res* with little Charlie and her dad on the run from the government-owned “Shop.” They can “push” their will on others, whether it be the power of suggestion, or the ability to blow things up real good. In the dynamics of the narrative (people on the run from covert government departments), *Firestarter* is not unlike Brian De Palma’s *The Fury* (1978) all over again. *Firestarter* also bears

more than a passing resemblance to Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981), since it features a psychic who can make his/her will explosively manifest. Originality, though, is probably besides the point. This film exists primarily as a showcase for its special effects.

And what effects they are. Cars explode, people erupt into flame, and a whole estate is destroyed in a series of impressive and very dangerous-looking blasts. Little Drew Barrymore sweats and furrows her brow throughout, and the audience is told that this is a girl who could split the world in two with her psychic powers. Take that, *Carrie*!

Firestarter's biggest problem is that it never really clarifies why Charlie can only sometimes sense bad men approaching. Sometimes this ability works and sometimes it doesn't, and the phenomena appears to function based solely on plot necessity. It works when the movie needs to demonstrate explosive effects, and doesn't work when the movie requires Charlie's capture.

Louise Fletcher and Art Carney have no reason to be in this movie, except to provide a canned, happy ending. Also, all but the most sensitive will probably laugh at the moment when (in a flashback) baby Charlie accidentally causes her mother's oven mitts to spontaneously burn up with a whoosh. Her mom is played by Heather Locklear, who has been known to raise temperatures herself.

It would probably be a better choice to view *Scanners*, *Carrie* or *The Fury*, but if Netflix has a long wait on those titles, *Firestarter* will do in a pinch.

LEGACY: A TV sequel aired in 2002, *Firestarter 2: Rekindled*. Miraculously, John Rainbird, the villain vanquished so memorably by Drew Barrymore in the original, returns in the sequel. This time, he's played by Malcolm McDowell, the first Native American/British man in film history.

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Not by a long shot. Still, it was better than the third film, and Jason sliding down a machete was stomach-churning back in the day (thanks, Savini). Still pretty formulaic, and I think we all knew Jason

would be coming back. The next film would be pretty lame, however.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kimberly Beck (Trish Jarvis); Peter Barton (Doug); Corey Feldman (Tommy Jarvis); E. Erich Anderson (Rob); Crispin Glover (Jimmy); Alan Hayes (Paul); Barbara Howard (Sara); Lawrence Monoson (Ted); Joan Freeman (Mrs. Jarvis); Judie Aronson (Samantha); Camilla More (Tina); Carey Moore (Terri); Tom Everett (Flashlight Man); Lisa Freeman (Nurse Morgan); Thad Geer (Running Man); Wayne Grace (Officer Jamison); Bonnie Hellman (Hitchhiker); William Irby (Helicopter Pilot); Paul Lukather (Doctor); Bruce Mahler (Axel); Arnie Moore (Medic).

CREW: Paramount Pictures. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Special Makeup Effects:* Tom Savini. *Executive Producers:* Lisa Barsamian, Robert M. Barsamian. *Co-Producer:* Tony Bishop. *Film Editor:* Joel Goodman. *Co-Editor:* Daniel Loewenthal. *Production Designer:* Shelton H. Bishop III. *Director of Photography:* Joao Fernandes. *Based on Characters created by:* Victor Miller, Ron Kurz, Martin Kitrosser, Carol Watson. *Screenplay by:* Barney Cohen. *Story by:* Bruce Hidemi Sakow. *Produced by:* Frank Mancuso Jr. *Stunt Coordinator:* John Sherrod. *Directed by:* Joseph Zito. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The corpse of mass murderer Jason Voorhees is taken to the local morgue following a night of terror, but Jason is only mostly dead, and so escapes after murdering a coroner (Mahler) and a nurse (Freeman). He returns to his regular stomping grounds near Crystal Lake, this time threatening a group of vacationing teens, beautiful twins, and a Jason-hunter named Rob (Anderson).

But Jason meets his match in Trish (Beck) and Tommy Jarvis (Feldman), a brother-and-sister team who battle to the death with the killer from Camp Blood. In the end, young Tommy Jarvis, a mask-maker and horror fan, shaves his head and makes himself up to look like Jason as a child. This ploy buys the Jarvis siblings the time they need to kill Jason, and Tommy goes at the murderer with a machete...

COMMENTARY: It's a natural development that Corey Feldman's Tommy Jarvis, a pre-pubescent boy who loves horror movies and even makes monster masks himself, plays such a critical role in *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter*. After all, kids Tommy's age had been hearing

from older sibling since 1980 about the *Friday the 13th* movies, and in 1984 were just discovering them through the expanding market of home video. A slightly younger fan base was developing, and would keep the series strong through the decade, one represented by kids in Tommy Jarvis's age bracket. So it makes sense that the filmmakers would adjust tactics slightly in this case, switching focus from a final girl to a resourceful younger brother. Jarvis even gets the honor of (temporarily) offing Jason in a final decapitation scene.

Other than the shift in lead characters, the untruthfully titled *The Final Chapter* reveals the *Friday the 13th* formula frozen in stone. Jason wears his hockey mask, shambles about, kills practical jokers, geeks (here represented by Crispin Glover), and murders those teenagers who dare to smoke weed or have sex. A storm abets Jason at a critical moment (as it has in all of his slash fests), and a final assault appears to take Jason down for the count. Accordingly, there's a bluntness to the formula that works in the film's favor. In *Part IV* of the franchise, Jason entirely does away with such things as suspense and sneakiness. Now when he wants to get into a locked house, he just tosses his latest victim through a window and makes his own entrance. It's a charming affectation in its own twisted way.

Many fans like this *Friday the 13th* installment the best, because it introduces the Jarvis character (a surrogate for the male viewers), and because it features a memorable *coup de grâce* for Jason. Tommy slices Jason's head (ouch!) and then—in a slow-motion shot echoing Alice's mad dash with the machete at the end of the first film—chops off his head. Be warned: even a good decapitation won't keep Jason down.

Throughout this book (and in general) I'm a staunch defender of women in horror movies. I believe horror films are not misogynist, but reveal to young women that they have the strength and intelligence to avoid the pitfalls of growing up and defeat "the monsters." Despite this critic's fervent belief in this theorem, *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* undercuts the argument badly. For instance, there's a set of female adolescent twins in the film who are eager to hook up with boyfriends. When the shy one is left with the nasty, irritating character named Teddy, she acquiesces. She puts her head down like an obedient puppy and goes to him on the sofa to solicit his attention. This is icky, and the only message sent is that it's better to be with a nasty man than to have no man at all. Also, Trish and Tommy's mom is depicted in the film almost perpetually jogging. Because she's divorced, you see, and she has to watch her figure.

And even though it's quite wonderful to get away from the final girl

just for once and make a nod to the next generation that was watching these slasher movies on video, it's equally difficult to deny that Tommy is the substitute patriarchal figure in the film. He fixes cars, the house lights, and becomes the protector to his older sister, Trish—more a traditional damsel in distress than usual. He even gets to take the final girl's role of defeating the monster.

Perhaps a discussion of sexual politics has no place in a review of a *Friday the 13th* movie that is intended merely to be good, scary fun, but the opposition (the Moral Majority, feminists, etc.) were certainly gazing at the films on these terms, and it's unfortunate that the movie didn't chose to take a higher road.

In the overall ranking of *Friday* movies of the 1980s, *The Final Chapter* (which laughably precedes an entry titled *A New Beginning*) is superior to parts *3*, *V* and *VIII*, but not nearly as much fun as *VI (Jason Lives)* nor as deeply frightening and fast-paced as parts *I* and *II*. Got that?

Gremlins

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“It is, truly, The Muppet Chain Saw Massacre.”—Harlan Ellison, *Harlan Ellison’s Watching*, Underwood-Miller, 1989, page 198.

“One wishes Dante had skipped the *Twilight Zone* movie and just made *Gremlins* longer. It’s slick Hollywood schlock, and its soul is more in cartoons than horror, but it’s got a tasty edge of nastiness in it, and nicely compares the cutesy Gizmo with more sinister critters that make for some enjoyable mayhem, particularly in a movie theater. The dark edge is really what makes this film special.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“Tell a stupid kid not to do things or all hell will break loose, and what does the stupid kid do? If only he had been taught to obey his elders, none of this would have happened and movie audiences everywhere would have been better off.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Zach Galligan (Billy Peltzer); Phoebe Cates (Kate); Hoyt Axton (Randy Peltzer); Polly Holliday (Mrs. Deagle); Frances Lee McCain

(Mrs. Peltzer); Judge Reinhold (Gerald); Dick Miller (Mr. Fudderman); Glynn Turman (Roy Hanson); Keye Luke (Grandfather); Scott Brady (Sheriff Frank); Corey Feldman (Pete); Jonathan Banks (Deputy Brent); Belinda Balaski (Mrs. Harris); Chuck Jones (Mr. Jones); Kenny Davis (Dorry); Jackie Joseph (Mrs. Futterman); Howie Mendel (Voice of Gizmo); Mushroom (Barney).

CREW: Warner Bros. and Steven Spielberg present A Joe Dante film. **Music:** Jerry Goldsmith. **Film Editor:** Tina Hirsch. **Gremlins Created by:** Chris Walas. **Production Designer:** James H. Spencer. **Director of Photography:** John Hora. **Executive Producers:** Steven Spielberg, Frank Marshall, Kathleen Kennedy. **Casting:** Susan Arnold. **Stop Motion:** Fantasy II Film Effects. **Mattes:** Dream Quest Images. **Produced by:** Michael Finnell. **Written by:** Christopher Columbus. **Directed by:** Joe Dante. **MPAA Rating:** PG. **Running time:** 106 minutes.

INCANTATION: “It’s a new world. You’ve got to be tough.”—Mrs. Deagle comments on the 1980s in *Gremlins*.

SYNOPSIS: A traveling salesman-inventor from Kingston Falls, Randy Peltzer (Axton), purchases a gift for his son Billy (Galligan), an odd little creature called a Mogwai, which Peltzer names Gizmo. There are three rules to owning this creature: keep him out of the light, especially sunlight, because it could kill him; never get him wet; and, most importantly, never feed him after midnight.

Once Gizmo is in Billy’s care, the rules begin to get broken. Gizmo gets wet, spawning a litter of fellow Gremlin creatures. Then, when Billy accidentally feeds the new brood after midnight, they go into a pupal stage for a time and finally re-emerge as monstrous, mischievous lizard-like creatures with sharp teeth. These Gremlins run amok in town, getting rid of the town bully Mrs. Deagle (Holliday) in the process, but also lay siege to the Peltzer house, resulting in a battle royale between Billy’s mother (McCain) and a Gremlin in the kitchen.

Finally, Billy and his new girlfriend Kate (Cates) trap and kill most of the Gremlins while they are at a showing of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Unfortunately, the ringleader of the bad Gremlins—Stripe—survives and makes for Montgomery Ward and a fountain where he can reproduce. Luckily, Billy has Gizmo on his side, and this tender little good Gremlin might just save the day.

COMMENTARY: *Gremlins* is a nasty and wicked satire of 1980s middle-class America. The rich are getting richer (even it means bank

foreclosure), yuppies reign, the middle class is getting screwed as work becomes harder to find, and mischief unexpectedly worms its way into this wealth-and property-obsessed, community in the form of little green monsters. Best of all, there's an underlying environmental message in *Gremlins*, warning audiences to be careful how we use our resources.

What has happened to Norman Rockwell's America? That's the question *Gremlins* asks, in a film that appears to be filmed on the self-same back lot that housed *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). This is an America where traditional values like self-reliance, independence and personal responsibility have become twisted by the pursuit of the almighty dollar. This is an America where a bank's junior vice president dreams of being a millionaire at thirty and finds value only in the fact that he has a new apartment (replete with cable TV). It's a world where the creepy self-indulgent rich, represented by Mrs. Deagle, advocate self-reliance and strength in others, yet don't have the compassion to save a family about to be evicted from their home on Christmas ... at least not if it interferes with a paycheck.

It's an America where absolutely everything is a commodity, either to be bought or sold. Even the greatest resources (like the Mogwai) are seen only in terms of their economic value. "I bet every kid in America would like to have one of these. This could really be the big one," enthuses Mr. Peltzer upon discovering Gizmo. In lieu of gainful employment, Peltzer is reduced to simply dreaming of making it big. One of these days, one of his inventions will take off, right?



Those fiendish little Mogwai enjoy a harmless Christmas carol in Joe Dante's 1984 hit, *Gremlins*.

So this is the America of get-rich-quick schemes as the last refuge of a scoundrel, and only the wise Asian Grandpa, determinedly representing non-American values, seems to understand how obsessed the culture is with money.

"Sold?" he asks, when he's confronted by Peltzer with that euphemistic description of how Gizmo was acquired "That's an interesting choice of words," he notes, meaning that it is not possible to buy and sell life, and Gizmo, of course, lives.

Under the guise of being a mainstream entertainment, *Gremlins* makes fun of virtually every aspect of modern American life. Little Gizmo is seen waving an American flag, a sign of the "new patriotism" sweeping the country, and the Old Grandfather is horrified to learn that the Peltzers have taught him to watch television. But that's what passes for culture nowadays, isn't it?

As if to cement the idea of middle America twisted by new and unhealthy values, Phoebe Cates' character, Kate, tells a dreadful story about Christmas gone wrong. When she was nine years old, her father went missing. They found him days later trapped in the chimney ... dressed as Santa Claus. Even the sanctity of Christmas seems twisted

and dark. More to the point, perhaps, this speech mocks sentimentality itself, a trait a little too familiar to the film's producer, Steven Spielberg.

In the 1980s, Americans living in a recession were also becoming increasingly worried about foreign economic domination, particularly in relationship to Japan and Japanese-made automobiles. That argument is also given voice in the film as Mr. Fudderman warns about foreign goods in America being built with "gremlins." His is the protectionist argument, that one can only trust American technology.

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GREMLINS



A toy Mogwai released by LJN toys in conjunction with the 1984 debut of *Gremlins*.

Given this stance, it's no surprise that *Gremlins* chooses at one point to highlight the 1950s movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* on TV. This film concerned an ideological invasion of America, wherein aliens were bringing the philosophy of Communism to the States. *Gremlins* seems to suggest an *economic* invasion of the country on par with the pod people. The foreign *Gremlins*, brought to America as the "new thing" to get rich quick, are actually threatening the economy, destroying property and wealth. Again, money and wealth is seen as the significant factor dominating the country.

More generally, *Gremlins* concerns how something innocent and beautiful—like, say, the Alaskan National Wildlife Reserve—can be perverted and destroyed by its business use, by its assimilation into the consumerism of the United States. The Gremlins are harmless creatures if a certain rules are applied and obeyed, but if those rules are ignored, they become a hazard.

Grandfather tells Billy that the American people would do with the Mogwai what his "society has done with all nature's gifts." He means that we would exploit the Gremlins. Buy 'em, sell 'em and make a killing.

Whatever the Gremlins represent (foreign machinery infecting America, a natural resource misused, or a new commodity in the culture of conspicuous consumption), Joe Dante's is a brilliantly unsentimental and horrific film. The scene in which a suburban mother battles a Gremlin in her suburban kitchen with every tool at her disposal (including the microwave oven) is brilliantly mephitic, and the film only goes off the rails when it stops to feature Gremlin antics and carousing at a local bar. The scene, involving a Gremlin break dance and doing a *Flashdance*-style routine (replete with leg warmer), is hysterical, but stops the film's momentum.

Either a crazy and deranged Muppet movie, or an invasion film in which chaos comes to town, *Gremlins* is ribald and dangerous, and for those who like their horror movies unencumbered by sweetness and light, this is one Spielberg-sponsored film that goes down easy.

LEGACY: A sequel, *Gremlins 2* (1990), reunited Billy and Gizmo in a

hi-tech high-rise overrun by Mogwai.

Impulse

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tim Matheson (Stewart); Meg Tilly (Jennifer); Hume Cronyn (Dr. Carr); John Karlen (Bob Russell); Bill Paxton (Eddie); Amy Stryker (Margo); Claude Earl Jones (Sheriff); Robert Wightman (Howard); Lorinne Vozoff (Mrs. Russell); Peter Jason (Man in Truck); Leonard Burns (Pissing Man).

CREW: ABC Motion Pictures. *Music:* Paul Chihara. *Casting:* Wally Nicita Associates, Deborah Lucchesi. *Film Editor:* David Holden. *Production Designer:* Jack T. Collis. *Director of Photography:* Thomas Del Ruth. *Written by:* Bert Davis, Don Carlos Dunaway. *Produced by:* Tim Zinneman. *Special Effects:* Tom Fisher, Greg Curtis. *Directed by:* Graham Baker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jennifer Russell (Tilly) returns home to the country with her doctor boyfriend Stewart (Matheson) after her mother (Vozoff) inexplicably telephones Jennifer, calls her a whore, and then shoots herself in the head. A recent earthquake in Jennifer's hometown seems to have caused odd behaviors amongst the citizens there: one man urinates on a car, another robs a bank and an ex-suitor shows his affections for Jennifer by breaking two of his fingers. Stewart deduces that these people are suddenly acting on their urges, on impulse, without restraint or censoring psychological factors. He traces the cause to the earthquake, and to a toxic spill ... and finally to a cover-up run by a strange man in an official U.S. government truck (Jason).

COMMENTARY: Except for a few kinky, highly perverse moments, *Impulse* looks and feels like a TV-movie. The movie is filmed and edited in undistinguished, workmanlike fashion, though at least the director makes full use of the rectangular frame. However, perhaps because of the fine cast headlining the effort, *Impulse* doesn't seem like a bad TV movie, and that makes all the difference.

In fact, this conspiracy-style horror film could very well serve as an early episode of *The X-Files*. *Impulse* also resembles George Romero's *The Crazies* (1973), another horror about a town subverted by a secret government project, only less frenetic, less dazzling.

If the main fear of the 1970s was that human reproduction was being imperiled and the very future was threatened (*It's Alive*, *Rabid* [1976], *Alien* [1979]), that threat had morphed slightly in the 1980s. The fear inherent in this “greed is good” decade was that the placid, wealthy, “normal” surface of American suburbia was secretly harboring a dark side, a sick underbelly that could destroy the traditional American family. It’s the “don’t worry be happy/be afraid, be very afraid” dynamic once again.

Impulse concerns the idea that a censoring mental factor has been removed from the nervous systems of certain citizens in a small Midwestern town (by the federal government’s contamination of the water and milk). Those contaminated people are suddenly acting on their darkest impulses. And that, of course, makes them dangerous.

To its credit, *Impulse* doesn’t play favorites in terms of who is infected. Tim Matheson (as the ostensible protagonist, Stewart) is with the gorgeous Meg Tilly but succumbs to his own wanton sexual urges in a moment of released inhibitions. He finds a willing young woman to perform fellatio on him in the doctor’s office; the film depicts the willing girl taking the gum out of her mouth slowly and deliberately before the act.

More disturbing than erotic, Stewart finds Eddie’s (Bill Paxton) secret masturbation stash, which includes photos of Eddie’s sister Jenny in various stages of undress (including topless). Stewart ultimately goes bad and kills Eddie, and because he wants to have sex now, not later, makes love to Meg Tilly’s character before the watchful eyes of her father.

Sound uncomfortable? Perverse? Well, it is both of those things. And yet, sexuality and violence are part of human nature; and more importantly, parts that are carefully regulated by inhibitions and fear of punishment.

Without that filter to prevent one from acting on impulse, the town featured in the film very quickly becomes a war zone. Fires burn out of control, people loot shops, there’s screaming in the streets, and consequently the film ponders the possibility that society could fall apart in moments, given the right set of not necessarily implausible circumstances.

In a post-Katrina 2006, none of this material seems beyond the pale. Indeed, in that situation, people didn’t need a “contamination” to give free rein to their impulses (which included rape, murder and looting)

... all they needed was the “cover” of a disaster.

It would be refreshing to report that *Impulse* is as meaningful, artistic and cleverly created (and laced with as much social commentary) as *The Crazies*, but the film simply isn’t in that class. It makes for a diverting, engaging hour-and-a-half, but never ascends to the upper tier of horror films.

The Initiation

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Vera Miles (Francis Fairchild); Clu Gulager (Dwight Fairchild); James Read (Peter); Marilyn Kagan (Marcia); Daphne Zuniga (Kelly Fairchild); Robert Dowdell (John Randall); Patty Heider (Nurse Higgins); Francis Peterson (Megan); Deborah Morehart (Allison); Paula Knowles(Beth); Trey Stroud (Ralph); Joy Jones (Heidi).

CREW: New World Pictures, Tom Vance-Leo Angelos, Georgian Bay Productions Ltd., and Joseph Monzio Present a Bruce Lansbury, Jock Gaynor Production of a Larry Stewart Film. *Casting:* Anita Dunn, Lee Clark. *Music:* Gabriel Black, Lance Ong. *Film Editor:* Ronald La Viine. *Director of Photography:* George Tirz. *Executive Producers:* Bruce Lansbury, Jack Gaynor. *Produced by:* Scott Winant. *Written by:* Charles Pratt, Jr. *Directed by:* Larry Stewart. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: It’s the official start of Hell Week, and Kelly Fairchild (Zuniga) and three other pledges must endure Megan the Maniac’s (Peterson) Hell Week Prank Night. This year it’s an excursion into Dad’s exclusive plaza, a multi-level emporium where they are to steal the night watchman’s uniform.

Three hundred miles away, half-a-dozen mental patients escape from Fireside Sanitarium and kill their nurse (Heider). This news deeply disturbs Kelly’s parents, the wealthy Dwight (Gulager) and Francis (Miles).

At school, Kelly befriends Peter (Read), a doctoral candidate working on dream and nightmare studies, and she reveals to him a recurring nightmare from her youth—and talks about her bout with amnesia at age nine. Peter begins to believe that Kelly’s parents are hiding a dark secret about Kelly, but before he can investigate the family history

further, it's prank night! Kelly, Allison (Morehart) and Marcia (Kagan) head into the Emporium, unaware that a psycho killer has already murdered the night watchman and is stalking them. Worse, Megan has the keys, so there is no way out.

COMMENTARY: The popular 1980s slasher paradigm gets another muscular work-out in *The Initiation*, a film loaded with the formula ingredients. Despite the familiarity of so many elements, however, the first half is deft at engendering sympathy for the final girl, Kelly (played by a young Daphne Zuniga), making her an appealing character. Ultimately, the film doesn't quite come off as thrills and chills are sparse.

The Initiation opens on a dark and stormy night, universally a sign of portent and danger in these films. In a scene recalling *Boogeyman* (1980), Young Kelly (at age nine) sees her mother and a lover making love. Kelly's dad unexpectedly arrives and discovers the tryst, leading to a fight and the crime in the past: Dad gets burned in the fireplace.

After a "stay awake shot" revealing that this deadly preamble is a memory/dream, the film leaps to the present and introduces the final girl as an adult, Kelly, as well as the organizing principle: a sorority initiation at an isolated location, a grand, three-story mall-like plaza. The victim pool, including the bad girl and practical jesters, are also spotlighted. The slasher elements keep on coming as *The Initiation* heads to Fireside Sanitarium to introduce a red herring, groundskeeper Jason Randall.

As *The Initiation* continues, P.O.V. stalk shots appear, a car won't start when needed, a killer strikes from the back seat, a shower scene (with a breast part of the movie reveal), the *coup de grâce* (a decapitation), the final chase, and a surprising sting in the tail/tale. Even the popular "vice must precede slice-and-dice" equation is called up, as Marcia and Ralph have sexual intercourse immediately before being murdered (by a harpoon gun, of all things).

The Initiation's most innovative adaptation of formula is the identity of the killer. Identity politics are involved, much as they are in *Happy Birthday to Me* (1982) and *Sleepaway Camp* (1983).

Clues as to this "surprise" ending are seeded throughout the film, as director Larry Stewart stages several scenes with Kelly standing before a mirror. Three such shots come fast and furious early in the film, as Peter and his assistant question whether Kelly is schizophrenic, a victim of multiple traumas emanating from her strange memories. The

answer is a little different, but the mirroring symbolism works as the vicious murderer in the film is a twisted reflection of the final girl.

The only question to ask, then, and one which *The Initiation* never answers, is this: Do Kelly and the “killer” share the same memories because of their unusual link? That element of the story could be made clearer, but slasher movies never reveal much depth in terms of psychology. Their game is to surprise and shock, and manipulate the well-worn paradigm.

The Initiation uses the “hell night” motif but, disappointingly, the pledges don’t get to the grand mall till relatively late in the picture, and so much of the movie seems dull. Stewart manages a few memorable and bloody death scenes. There’s one nice shot, for instance, when Megan is hunted. She dominates the frame’s foreground, and behind her—for a split second—a shadow armed with a bow and arrow appears. But aside from a few competent Michael Myers-style reveals, *The Initiation*’s hoped-for momentum never kicks in. The movie doesn’t shift into high gear until relatively late, when Kelly and Marsha hide in an elevator. The film’s last act is actually less satisfying than the competent set-up. The trackdown and “kill” set pieces wherein the killer strikes at Meghan, the practical jokers and Kelly’s friends is rather lethargic, and the location—the plaza—is so big (it looks like a skyscraper) that no good sense of the terrain is established.

The Initiation is a competent if derivative slasher film. It’s somewhere in the middle of a very large pack of eighties “knife kill” movies, and primarily worth one’s time to see how it plays with the ingredients of an overused paradigm.

Night of the Comet

★ ★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Roger Beltran (Hector); Catherine Mary Stewart (Regina); Kelli Maroney (Samantha); Sharon Farrell (Doris); Mary Woronov (Audrey); Geoffrey Lewis (Carter); Michael Bowen (Larry); Peter Fox (Wilson); John Achorn (Oscar); Lissa Layne (Davenport); Devon Ericson (Minister); Ivan E. Roth (Willy); Chance Boyer (Brian); Janice Kawaye (Sarah); Andrew Boyer (Rogers); Stanley Brock (Mel); Marc Poppel (DMK); Raymond Lynch (Chuck); Bob Perlow (TV Reporter); John

Stuart West (Monster Cop); Alex Brown (Monster in Alley); Dick Rude, Chris Pedersen (Stock Boys); Bobby Porter (Monster Kid); Michael Hanks (Narrator).

CREW: Atlantic Releasing Corporation Presents a Thomas Coleman and Michael Rosenblatt Presentation in association with Film Development Fund. *Casting*: Annette Benson. *Music*: David Richard Campbell. *Music Supervisor*: Don Perry. *Associate Producers*: Nancy Israel, Sandra Scheik. *Production Design*: John Muto. *Film Editor*: Fred Stafford. *Director of Photography*: Arthur Albert. *Executive Producers*: Andrew Lane, Wayne Crawford. *Special Effects*: Court Wizard. *Makeup Effects Design*: David B. Miller. *Written and Directed by*: Thom Eberhardt. *MPAA Rating*: PG-13. *Running time*: 95 minutes.

P.O.V.

“*Night of the Comet* was reviewed on the same segment of Siskel & Ebert that *The Terminator* was reviewed on. One of those guys said that for their money, they thought *Night of the Comet* was a better movie. And I said, ‘What?’ Because I looked at *The Terminator* and thought it was great. Still, it’s hard to imagine Linda Hamilton being the mother of a surviving generation, whereas our girls? You could see their children would be brought up to take names and kick ass...”—Director Thom Eberhardt discusses *Night of the Comet*.

SYNOPSIS: A comet passes Earth for the first time in sixty-five billion years (since the dinosaurs died out virtually overnight), and wipes out all human life save for those few people who happened to be protected by steel walls. Among these survivors is 18-year-old video-game professional Regina (Stewart) and her smart-mouth younger sister, Samantha (Maroney), who survived courtesy of a movie projection room and a garden tool shed, respectively. The young women quickly come to understand the scope of the disaster that has occurred, and head first to a radio station, where they run into a truck driver named Hector (Beltran) who spent the night in his truck and was thus protected from the terrible affects of the comet too. The worst news of all is that some citizens haven’t died yet, but have turned into psychotic zombies that are rapidly decomposing.

COMMENTARY: In Thom Eberhardt’s delightful *Night of the Comet*, the apocalypse mentality of the 1980s horror cinema again boils to the surface. An America fearful of civilization’s end (and primed by efforts like *The Day After* [1983] and *Testament* [1983]) saw the end of existence around every corner, and this film takes a light-hearted look at what happens when two Valley Girls survive the disaster.

Although the threat in the film is not nuclear in nature, the film is a classic “empty city” effort like *The Omega Man* (1971), and the survivors are left to contemplate a strangely pre-programmed 20th century world, one where traffic lights, sprinkler systems and radio broadcasts continue to operate, even in the absence of their makers. Following the comet’s passage, the film pauses to create a sense of isolation in its views of an abandoned Los Angeles. The emptiness is almost tangible, as is the sense of a planet that has passed us by. All that remains of the vast human populace are its clothes, lying wrinkled on the ground, covered by a few inches of dust and powder.



A forerunner to heroes like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Sydney Bristow, Regina (Catherine Mary Stewart) gets ready for zombie-killing action in Thom Eberhardt's droll *Night of the Comet* (1984).

Is that to be mankind's legacy?

Concerns over questions like that are leavened in *Night of the Comet* by the fact that the survivors are two resourceful, attractive and good-

humored young women, Regina (Stewart) and Samantha (Maroney). Suddenly, these youngsters who have probably never given a second thought to politics, presidents or current events are placed in the situation of not only having to survive, but of re-starting the human race. As the last two females on Earth, they are the ultimate final girls.

Night of the Comet has fun expressing the sisters' point of view. They arm themselves, which is fun, but then they decide to go shopping at a mall and run into punk zombies (but only after a musical interlude which includes Cindy Lauper's anthem "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"). Eventually, Sam and Regina squabble over the world's last eligible bachelor and worry that he might be gay. Although these scenes are amusing and played for irony, they're also strangely realistic. This indeed feels like the way teenagers would react if placed in this very unreal situation.

Long before *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* created "Slayer Slang," that smart, catchy lingo that is half-intellectual, half-Valley Girl, *Night of the Comet* charted some of the same territory, while also forecasting *Buffy*'s sense of female empowerment.

In its own way, *Night of the Comet* is strangely optimistic about the apocalypse. It's the end of the world and they know it, but Regina and Sam feel fine. They get to drive great cars, go shopping, and wear terrific clothes.



Punk zombies! A look into the face of an evil stock boy (Dick Rude) in *Night of the Comet*.

Some critics may deride this viewpoint as silly or lacking *gravitas*, but it's the duty of every "next generation" to be optimistic about the future, isn't it? By film's end, Regina and Sam have begun to rebuild

the American nuclear family with Hector and two rescued children, and the overriding sense is that they aren't going to make the same mistakes the previous generation did. These women don't mourn what's gone, because—in their eyes—it isn't worth mourning. Their stepmother was a nasty, selfish shrew concerned only with wealth. Their "punk" peers at the mall already worshiped death and their wishes came true. Even the scientists in the film are depicted as heartless, mad exploiters, more interested in saving themselves than in re-building the world.

With role models like that, is it any wonder that Regina and Sam don't stand around and cry? The whole burden of civilization has fallen to them, and they have the vitality, energy and good humor to face that challenge. As if to make this point, when the new American family is finally assembled in the film, rain also falls in Los Angeles. The dusty remains of the dead—and the past—are washed away into the storm drains. The zombies are gone, and it's a new, fresh world.

Simultaneously deep in conception and light on its feet, *Night of the Comet* is one of those obscure eighties miracles. Now if someone would just release the film on DVD...

CLOSE-UP: Making *Night of the Comet*: Since he was a kid, director Thom Eberhardt has always loved "end of the world" post-apocalypse science fiction films, and it's that love of films such as *Five* (1951), *Target Earth* (1954) and *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), what he terms "empty city movies," that brought the artist to the creation of the 1984 sleeper hit, *Night of the Comet*.

However, there was another element in the mix that he wanted to include. His love of movies had always also included a fascination and attraction to strong women, film icons like Ginger Rogers. He began to wonder, could he write a feature film script about the end of the world, and populate that movie with smart, funny, sassy women? Years before *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, this idea was a revelation.

Eberhardt was working directing PBS "after school"-type specials, ones that starred teenage girls, so he thought he would run the idea past them and see how they would react. They didn't know it, but they were his "research" for *Night of the Comet*.

"I sat down with these girls that I was working with, having a lunch break. I asked them a simple question ... 'What if you woke up one morning, got out of bed, and discovered that everybody else was gone, that you were the only people left?' From that conversation, with—

basically—two thirteen-year-old Valley Girls, their immediate reaction was not to question where everybody went, why they were alone, nor to be afraid of anything. Their immediate reaction was all the stuff that they could do.

“Then I asked them, ‘What if there are bad guys around?’ Zombies or monsters or something, because in *Target Earth* these were 1950s-style lumbering robots. What if there was a villainous presence?

“They said, ‘We’d get guns. If we’re the only people in the city, there will be plenty of guns.’ These girls had never touched guns in their life! Their family didn’t own guns of any kind and certainly not automatic weapons, but that didn’t faze them. They would get artillery. That’s what their mindset was.

“They did not, for one second, see the downside of any of this until we got to boyfriends. That was the only thing that gave them pause. At that point, they started to become a little bit uncomfortable with the idea of being absolutely alone. We had a discussion about what if there is only one boy, but two girls, and they admitted there might be some trouble about that.”

From that conversation, Eberhardt realized he had the elements in place to craft his script. “From that point on, I just sort of wrote the script very fast, probably in the course of about two or three weeks. Partly because I was having fun writing it, putting these girls through their paces.”

After a failed meeting with Mike Medavoy at Orion, Eberhardt and his partner at Film Finances went to a meeting with an outfit called Atlantic Releasing.

“Atlantic had a big problem at that moment, because they needed a script. They had just had, quite unexpectedly, a ton of money fall in on them from *Valley Girl* [1983], which had been a regional release. It had been for them this rather big hit, and money was raining in. Money was coming in so fast that they were having a hard time hiding it to keep it out of the hands of the profit participants. They wanted a script for the teen market, which they had found in *Valley Girl*, so they were looking for a movie to appeal to that.

“They had seven hundred thousands dollars they wanted to plow into a movie *right now*. All they said was to make it different, because movies like *Repo Man* [1984] were making inroads on the drive-in circuit. Avant garde movies were morphing into something viable.

They didn't care what it was, they said 'Get it done.'"

The only sticking point was that Eberhardt wanted to direct the picture as well as write it. "Atlantic didn't want any part of me as a director. They just wanted to buy the script outright and they offered me fifty thousand dollars.

"I said, 'Gee, I don't really like writing and I really wrote this so I could direct it and make this movie.' So I said no. There was a stand-off for about a week and then they called and said, 'All right, we'll give you twenty-five thousand to write and twenty-five thousand to direct.' And I said, 'What a deal,' and I took it."

But then the troubles *really* began.

"Andy Lane and Wayne Crawford were my producers. They were nothing if not the kings of no budget and low-budget productions. They had written and produced *Valley Girl*. And by Wayne Crawford's own admission, they never liked or got *Night of the Comet*. Wayne told me that just as we were getting ready to go into production. Wayne and I went out to dinner and Wayne said, 'I don't get this script and I don't understand why they want to make it. All I know is we've got a contract with them that says we've got to do it. So we've got to do it.'

"Part of the animosity was that Wayne and Andy were profit participants in *Valley Girl*, having written and produced the movie for Atlantic. They had the more-than-sneaking suspicion that their money was being spent on *Night of the Comet*, so they were a little reticent. People have different tastes, and *Night of the Comet* was not to Wayne or Andy's taste."

What Eberhardt didn't know was that his producers had a secret plan to rectify their discomfort. "I was, at that point, too dumb to worry about it," he laughs. "I was too dumb to know what terrible things can happen. I didn't find out until way after the fact that Wayne and Andy—having no faith in me and thinking the script was pretty bad—had plans from the get-go to replace me as director.

"Wayne and Andy had a master plan to go ahead and let me shoot a week. Atlantic would look at dailies and see how truly terrible they were, and then Wayne and Andy would go in and make their case again that I had to be replaced. They'd put the production on hiatus, get rid of me, and bring in another director who they had waiting in the wings. And that director would take over and I would be gone. That director was Roy London, who was Wayne Crawford's acting

coach. Wayne didn't want to be a producer, he wanted to be an actor.

"My only knowledge of this was that my two actresses, Cathy and Kelly—while I was deluged with pre-production—were being sent over to work with an acting coach, and this was all set up by Wayne and Andy. I had nothing to do with it. I found about and I said, 'What the hell? You're sending my actresses over to be coached by someone I don't goddamn know?' They said, 'Oh, Tom, this is a normal thing. You're just so amateurish you just don't know.' I said, 'It is not normal, these are my actors! If I'm going to have them coached by someone other than me, then I'm damn well going to pick [the coach], not you guys!'"

Eberhardt's second clue came during shooting. "Roy was coming to see dailies the first week. He was showing up with Wayne, Andy, myself and the director of photography. I said, 'What's Roy doing here?' Much to Wayne and Andy's surprise, Atlantic Releasing was either liking what they saw in dailies or liking it enough that they didn't want to spend more money on a different director.

"By the end of the first week, Wayne and Andy knew they were stuck with me. We went through the rest of the show, and I have to give Wayne and Andy credit. We could not have done *Night of the Comet* for seven hundred thousand dollars without them. Those guys every day were like cattle drivers, like cowboys moving cattle herds. Every day, they had to cover so much territory, and that's what they did. It was a Herculean task considering how much we'd bitten off to do for that small amount of money. I don't have to love them. I don't have to even like them very much ... and I don't hate them. They did their job. They're producers and they produced the movie.

"After all of that, Wayne and Andy started warming up to the movie," says Eberhardt. "They've spoken very kindly about the movie."

But that doesn't mean Eberhardt could pass up a golden opportunity to push back a little. "I had a chance to actually be kind of catty," he reveals. "After I found out about this whole thing with Roy, the next year Wayne and Andy—because they had delivered *Valley Girl* and *Night of the Comet*—got to do a movie called *Jake Speed* [1986]. It was pure Wayne and Andy, with Roy London being the acting coach and uncredited co-director along with Andy. They got to do their movie, which was their take on an Indiana Jones kind of thing. This was Wayne Crawford acting in the lead, Andy Lane directing, and Roy was in the mix.

“I got invited to the premiere of *Jake Speed*. Atlantic had put in a big ad about *Jake Speed* opening up, and it had Wayne Crawford running like Indiana Jones and leaping out from the ad at you, and a girl hanging on him and all that kind of stuff. And the ad read: ‘From the Producers Who Brought You *Night of the Comet*.’”

“So I went to the screening, and I guess I had this noticeable, sardonic smile. Andy Lane came up to me and asked me how I liked the picture. And I just said ‘You know,’ and avoided telling him what I thought. I said that I liked the ad. I thought the ad was pretty cool. I liked ‘From the producers of *Night of the Comet*!’ Andy was embarrassed by that and said, ‘Atlantic came up with it, we’re not going around saying that.’”

“And I said, ‘Don’t worry. At this time next year, you’re going to be known as the producers of *Jake Speed*...’”

But back to *Night of the Comet*. Eberhardt has another interesting tidbit, this one about casting. “Heather Langenkamp, who was the star of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, came in and read for the part we ultimately gave to Kelli Maroney. She was number one on our casting list.”

And what are his memories of shooting the picture?

“I wasn’t used to doing movies with Hollywood fringe people,” he admits. “So I was naive. Apparently my crew—I found out after the fact—was pretty cocaine-driven. I was never aware of it. It was just one more indication of how out of it and unhip I was that I was blissfully unaware that a lot of my crew was slipping off and then being much jollier when they returned to the set.

“We worked very hard days. We worked on that movie twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine hours a day. It became a concern after a while that people were getting so tired and sleepy that they were starting to have accidents on the set. People started to trip and stumble and fall, and we started getting worried about broken legs.”

He also had to contend with the fact that the producers still didn’t understand the project. “I remember, at one point, it was right when I was having Kelli drop the TV off the third floor of the mall on the bad guys, and she was smiling. Andy actually grabbed me—grabbed me by the arm and pulled me while I was trying to get ready to shoot this thing. He pulled me to the side and was furious. He said, ‘What are you doing? These girls look like they’re having fun. It looks like a joke

to them! It's the crisis of their life, they should be terrified!"

"I said, 'Andy—this is fun. They are having fun, on a certain level.'

"His primary concern was that it was going to have to be re-shot and blow out the budget, because it was an expensive location. I realized what a terrible position he was in, because he was having to produce this movie day after day and he just didn't get it. The weird thing to me is that I thought it was perfectly obvious.

"You have to realize that there was no obvious model for what I was doing. It's not that I was trying consciously to be a pioneer; it was that this was a teenage fantasy. It was this mix of scares and laughs, and generally the wisdom in Hollywood to this day is that you don't want to have mixed genres."

Editing came next, and it was here, says Eberhardt, that he began to get some perspective on the film. "So much of the stuff loses its symbolic impact and it just becomes this blitz of mechanical edits and effect and it's really hard when you work as fast as we did on that and step back and take it as one thing. You're too involved in the pieces. When we finished the film, I finally stepped back and I was able to take a breath and look at it. I thought it was pretty much what I intended."

When the movie was released, it was distributed nationwide, a first for Atlantic, which was a small independent. "*Night of the Comet* was sort of the experiment for that. As a result, we got booked into theaters ahead of *2010* [1984]. We were released the weekend before Thanksgiving, I believe, and there were still drive-ins at that point. There were eight hundred prints in the initial release.

"The first week, we did okay business, but we generated word of mouth. And then, the second weekend was Thanksgiving weekend. We played in a lot of big theaters, primarily because they were running our movie to be able to play trailers for *2010*. When *2010* opened a few weeks later *Night of the Comet* got kicked out in favor of it, so we were basically in theaters about four weeks."

But it was enough. On a budget of seven hundred thousand dollars, *Night of the Comet* grossed more than twenty-five million.

"Then it went into video sales, and it was in the first generation of movies that had a video release as part of its normal pattern. In those days, *Variety* was reporting on Wednesdays the top fifty videocassette sales, and we stayed in the top fifty for seven to eight months. And

those days, videocassettes were selling for \$79.95. So Atlantic made a lot of money.”

But then things got weird, and today *Night of The Comet* resides in a legal black hole. Eberhardt isn’t even sure who owns the rights, which is why it hasn’t been released on DVD.

“Rights have been fragmented. Someone may have the remake rights, someone may have the Pay TV rights. A DVD never materialized because DVD is a new technology and in 1984, the license to do VHS might have been written in some peculiar, narrow way to exclude other technologies.

“I’m contractually tied to any rights or remakes, so anyone who wants to do that has to come see me. The only thing is that people have been trying to work it the other way. I’ve had—in the last three or four years—various attorneys who have a mystery unnamed client who wants to remake *Night of the Comet*. And they want to know what I know about the rights. I just shrug.”

Does Eberhardt have a theory why the film has remained so memorable? In fact, he does. He’s discussed that very topic with a psychologist!

“It didn’t occur to me on any kind of conscious level, but what this guy was saying was that *Night of the Comet* was like a reflection of where teenagers are in their personality development. At that point, they’re still extremely egocentric. They believe the world orbits around them, and that their concerns are the only ones that matter. They have little concern for anybody or anything around them. He said that *Night of the Comet* is a visual representation of that stage. There’s these two girls and nothing else matters.

“I wasn’t doing that on any conscious level,” says Eberhardt, “but it makes a lot of sense. I had no illusions when I did it that this was anything more than a drive-in movie.”

Night of the Zombies
(a.k.a. *Virus*, *Hell of the Living Dead*)
½ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Margit Evelyn Newton (Lia Rousseau); Frank Garfield

(Zantoro); Selan Karay (Mark); Robert O'Neil (Lt. Mike Landon); Gaby Renom (Osborne); Kuis Fonoll (Vincent); Piero Fumelli (Mr. Farrar); Bruno Boni (Josie's Husband); Patrizia Costa (Josie); Cesare Di Vito (Lawson); Sergio Pislar (Fowler); Bernard Seray (Barrett's Assistant); Victor Israel (Zombie Priest); Pepe Ballenster (Reporter); Joaquine Blanco (Barrett); Esther Mesina (Woman in Bar).

CREW: A Beatrice Film, S.r.l. Roma Films, Dara Barcellona co-production. *Story and Screenplay:* Claudio Fragrasso, J.M. Cunilles. *Production Designer:* Antonio Velart. *Film Editor:* Claudio Borroni. *Director of Photography:* John Cabrera. *Music by:* Goblin. *Under the direction of:* G. Dell Orso. *Executive Producer:* Sergio Cortona. *Directed by:* Vincent Dawn (a.k.a. Bruno Mattei). *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Pardon us for this evil we have created.”—A scientist’s last words in Bruno Mattei’s *Night of the Zombies*.

SYNOPSIS: In New Guinea, a chemical plant leaks a terrible gas that causes animals (like rats) and humans to degenerate into flesh-eating zombies. A SWAT team of four, a female reporter and her cameraman find themselves in the middle of a full-fledged zombie apocalypse and flee to a native village. There are zombies there too, so they seek refuge in a house, *also* crawling with zombies. Finally, the survivors of this group take a raft away from land and end up at the very chemical plant where the disaster occurred ... *also* overrun with zombies. The survivors are killed one at a time, but not before they learn that the chemical was created intentionally, designed to make the people of the Third World feed on each other, and thus solve the crisis of overpopulation. But the deadly gas has now spread worldwide, and the zombie apocalypse continues...

COMMENTARY: It’s a close race to see which horror movie has been copied (or ripped off) more, John Carpenter’s *Halloween* or George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1979). While most American producers jumped on the bandwagon of the former prototype, no doubt because the slasher film is relatively cheap to produce, Italy settled on the latter.

And frankly, some of the Italian zombie movies are tolerable. This critic rather enjoyed Lucio Fulci’s *Zombie* (1979), but that example is just about the top of the heap.

Somewhere way down at the bottom of that particular pile is Bruno Mattei’s *Night of the Zombies*. This makes the same director’s *Blood Kill*

look like an introspective art film and a bastion of good taste and originality.

Night of the Zombies is perhaps the most blatant rip-off of *Dawn of the Dead* ever produced. To start with, the SWAT team uniforms look like they were borrowed from the Romero film, and more disturbingly, the brilliant Goblins soundtrack of *Dawn* has been excerpted here, note for note. This memorable (and terrific) pulse-pounding soundtrack initially gives one a warm feeling of *deja vu* and excitement, about this film. But those happy thoughts quickly dissipate as the true quality of the film becomes clear.

Other similarities with Romero's classic? How about a female reporter and her boyfriend in main roles? Or zombies that must be shot in the head to be killed? Or a SWAT team raid early in the film, seemingly unconnected to the zombie plot? Or an epilogue that leaves room for the nightmare to continue? Yes, this all derives from the Romero "Living Dead" play book.

Rip-offs can be fun, especially if one enjoys the zombie milieu. *Night of the Zombies*, however, is noticeably *not* fun, partly because the movie runs too long, and does so with the oppressive inclusion of stock footage. This isn't stock nature footage that lasts for a few seconds and is gone (like *The Prey*), but rather lengthy and obvious interludes, and the grain of the stock material simply don't match. This means that our *dramatis personae* stare at something off-screen, and the movie cuts to a native New Guinea dance and tribal ritual. And it goes on and on. When things get dull (and that happens frequently) the director cuts away to an elephant herd, or a bird clipping a nest in flight, or bats, or a national assembly, on and on.

Night of the Zombies adds little that is original to the zombie film cycle, and that, perhaps, is the film's biggest drawback. *Return of the Living Dead* brought a new punk/nihilist aesthetic to the genre, and gave the world brain-eating zombies. That was a shift in tone *and* mythology. Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) charted the evolution of the zombie with the education of a ghoul named Bub. *Night of the Zombies* can't offer anything of interest on its own terms, instead vampirizing *Dawn's* score and proving dependent on stock footage to establish a sense of time and place.

That's not to say there isn't an amusing moment here and there. The "cat jolt" scare is given an upgrade, when the SWAT team witnesses a zombie cat burrow out of a corpse's chest. And then there's an attack by a granny, and a moment that attempts to fuse Fred Astaire dancing

skills with *Night of the Living Dead* zombie thrills.

The film ends right back where Romero started things in 1968, with the not-so-surprising revelation that someone close-by is actually a zombie, not a human. And whereas that moment in the graveyard with Barbara and Johnny was frightening and unexpected in *Night of the Living Dead*, the ultimate shot of *Night of the Zombies* is an out-of-focus peek of a zombie in blue pancake makeup with a really fake eye appliance. It's on this image that the movie ends ... with a freeze frame no less, so the film's incompetence can be lingered over in detail.

A Nightmare on Elm Street

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“As skillful as it is sickening ... it has considerable style, some good performances and clever special effects.”—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1984.

“Wes Craven uses many of the conventional tricks of the trade ... but he wields them with a verve that makes all those Stephen King movies seem very second-rate.”—Francis Wheen, *The New Statesmen*, September 6, 1985.

“[O]ne of Craven’s better splatter efforts.”—John McCarty, *The Official Splatter Movie Guide*, St. Martin’s Press, 1989, page 95.

“Gore and sex are kept to a minimum. Imaginative ideas, cinematography and physical effects are maximized.”—Roy Frumkes, *Films in Review*, February 1985, page 209.

“If Wes Craven ever sold his soul to make himself immortal, it was before making this film (and the Devil gave it back after he made *Scream*). Freddy Krueger is a marvelous creation, and Robert Englund brings him to life with all the gusto you’d want in a franchise-founding fiend. Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, and even a dusted-off John Saxon lend their significant acting talents (well, certainly Langenkamp and Depp) to the proceedings, and Craven truly creates a fictional nightmare for us, rather than just serving up nastiness culled from man’s-inhumanity-to-man lectures he gave as a college professor. With Freddy Krueger, Craven picked up movie horror and brought it a few steps forward, which is all that we ask of

our geniuses. Too bad Freddy would be commercialized to death, but then again, that's what the decade was about.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Saxon (Lt. Donald Thompson); Ronee Blakeley (Marge Thompson); Heather Langenkamp (Nancy Thompson); Amanda Wyss (Tina Gray); Nick Corri (Rod Lane); Johnny Depp (Glen Lantz); Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger); Charles Fleischer (Dr. King); Joseph Whipp (Sgt. Parker); Lin Shaye (The Teacher); Joe Unger (Sgt. Garcia); Mimi Meyer-Craven (Nurse); Jack Shea (Minister); Ed Call (Mr. Lantz); Sandy Lipton (Mrs. Lantz); Dave Andrews (Foreman); Jeffrey Levine (Coroner); Donna Woodrum (Tina's Mom); Sashawnee Hall (Cop #1); Carol Pritikin (Cop #2); Brian Reise (Cop #3); Jason Adams (Surfer #1); Paul Grenier (Tina's Mom's Boyfriend).

CREW: A New Line Cinema Corporation Release. A Media Home Entertainment and Smart Gee Presentation of a Robert Shaye Production, A Wes Craven Film. *Casting:* Annette Benson. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Production Designer:* Greg Fonseca. *Special Mechanical Effects Designer:* Jim Doyle, Theatrical Engines. *Associate Producer:* John Burrows. *Film Editor:* Rick Shaine. *Music:* Charles Bernstein. *Co-Producer:* Sara Risher. *Executive Producers:* Stanley Dudelson, Joseph Wolf. *Producer:* Robert Shaye. *Special Effects Makeup:* David Miller. *Stunt Coordinator:* Tony Cecere. *Written and Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION:

One, two, Freddy's coming for you.

Three, four, better lock your door.

Five, six, grab your crucifix.

Seven, eight, gonna stay up late.

Nine, ten, never sleep again.

—An old jump rope song sung by the kids on Elm Street.

SYNOPSIS: Teenager Tina Gray (Wyss) experiences a recurring nightmare about a burned man (Englund) wearing a red and green sweater, a fedora ... and armed with a razor blade-adorned glove. Worse, she discovers that her best friend Nancy Thompson

(Langenkamp) is experiencing the very same nightmare. Tina holds an impromptu sleepover with Nancy, her boyfriend Glen (Depp) and Tina's beau, the juvenile delinquent Rod (Corri). In the middle of the night, Tina has a nightmare, but the wounds that her nightmare man inflict on her with his deadly glove are real, and she dies a bloody death before Rod's very eyes.

Though Rod is hunted and arrested for Tina's murder by Nancy's father, Lt. Thompson (Saxon), Nancy comes to believe that there is a different explanation for the crime. She learns from her alcoholic mother (Blakeley) that years ago, the parents of Elm Street got together to kill a man named Freddy Krueger, a child murderer who escaped justice on a technicality. They hunted him down to his boiler room, burned him alive, and kept his hat and finger knives as a trophy. Now Nancy realizes that she is paying for the sins of her parents, haunted by Krueger, who has become a supernatural avenger capable of killing people in their dreams.

First Rod dies, and then Glen, and so Nancy rigs a set of booby-traps for Krueger and hopes to pull him out of the dream world and into reality, where he can be stopped. But can one stop the boogeyman this way, or must Nancy turn her back on Krueger, and take his energy away that way?

COMMENTARY: Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is recognized as a classic of the horror genre. It's also a high watermark in 1980s cinema in general, and for good, solid reasons. From the Freudian opening dream sequence set in a boiler room to the impressive battle royale between a determined, resourceful teen and the monstrous "bad father," Freddy Krueger, this is wizardly filmmaking. The cinematic techniques utilized throughout Craven's production powerfully propel the drama, but a *Nightmare on Elm Street* achieves greatness not just via impressive special effects, but through its powerful characterizations and provocative themes. Indeed, the film is such a landmark that it opened the floodgates for a slew of "rubber reality" movies, horror films with a fantasy bent and an "Is it real or is it a dream?" narratives.

Elm Street's plot unfolds rapidly. In the preamble (and accompanied by weird, disturbing music), Fred Krueger is introduced as he builds his unique weapon of mass destruction: the glove with razor fingers. This overhead shot, gazing down on the action, is captured in a frame within a black frame, focusing the audience attention before the film goes wide and uses the full screen.

At that point, Tina's nightmare is dramatized. She's a young attractive girl wearing a white nightgown as she nervously traverses a dark corridor. This is Freddy's boiler room, and the hissing, steaming pipes represent the industrial bowels of our society. The forgotten place where filth hides and breeds.

Within five minutes of this opening sequence, clever dialogue and pointed glances indicate that all four of the central teens (Tina, Nancy, Glenn and Rod) are experiencing nightmares. Impressively, the actors don't seem selected primarily on the basis of their looks, but come across as real and likable kids.

Within ten minutes, it is established that these hunted teenagers are dreaming of an identical boogeyman. Finally, in less than twenty minutes, Tina has been attacked and savagely murdered. Her death scene depicts her torn apart, defying the laws of gravity as a nightmare death becomes all too real. Thus the plot is established rapidly and the audience is hooked. Craven has never created a better-paced film and there is not a wasted breath or gratuitous shot in the mix. This is a horror locomotive rolling under full steam, hellbent on scaring the hell out of the viewer.

Tina's bloody mid-air demise may be the finest in the series (Craven returned to it and improved it after a fashion, in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* [1994]). The sequence is staged for shocking effect, artfully edited from two deliberately contrasting perspectives. The audience detects what Tina herself experiences as Freddy appears underneath the bed covers with her and attacks ferociously. The other perspective belongs to Tina's boyfriend, Rod. Since he is conscious, Rod can see no boogeyman, simply invisible blades slicing into his screaming girlfriend's flesh and throwing her violently across the room. The divergent perspectives of victim and eyewitness make the film's delicate chemistry clear to viewers. Dreams can have deadly impact on reality. Die in your dream, you're really dead.



He kills you in your dreams. Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund)—with his arms outstretched—makes his rubber-reality debut in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

Dream landscapes are fully and imaginatively incorporated into *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Unlike other films, wherein dreams may simply be forgotten or shunted aside once a character awakens, here they are a continual and ongoing source of terror that can result in death. In combination with precise editing, a spinning bedroom, a stunt woman suspended on wires and gallons of stage blood, Tina's death scene comes to life as something of a masterpiece. Unlike later *Elm Street* films, the terror focuses on flesh and blood rather than elaborate special effects creations, such as hellish domains, large inhuman creatures or the like. This focus on the organic, the human, makes the phantasms feel real and individual, internal to the characters rather than the results of a committee's imagination about what a cool effect might look like. This is the only *Nightmare on Elm Street* film in which the nightmares are authentically terrifying, not “mainstream” terrifying.

Rubber reality is the phrase used to describe Craven's stunning

transitions from reality to dream, and a thrilling and novel aspect of *Elm Street*'s tapestry is the way that each character glides unknowing from one plane of existence to the other. There is no warning of this transition, and the audience does not always "see" Tina or Nancy actually falling asleep. The film's structure therefore leaves ample space for the unexpected. The final twist is a clever example: By one interpretation, the audience has not truly witnessed characters stepping into and out of various dreamscapes but rather a film which itself plays as Nancy's long, individual dream.

The rubber reality of *Elm Street* is crafted through an arsenal of unique trick shots, and Craven leaves no stone unturned in his quest to unsettle his audience. The spinning room is deployed again, but for a different purpose: the murder of Glenn (a very young and whisper-thin Johnny Depp). Here the room is filmed upside down and gallons of blood are poured through a hole in Glen's bed. On film, the bed appears to be on the floor, so the blood spurts upward with incredible force and velocity. A topsy-turvy angle may seem simple, but it's a shot which perfectly expresses the rage and violence of Krueger's ambush. He annihilates Glenn so powerfully that blood flows like a waterfall in reverse.

Also evocative of nightmares is Craven's fun use of false stairs. As Freddy pursues Nancy in a nightmare, she races up the staircase to her house's second floor, only to crash through the surface of the stairs and find her feet mired in milky, glue-like mush. Anyone who has ever had a nightmare of being pursued can readily identify with Nancy's dilemma here: the very landscape of the dream prevents her escape and aids the boogeyman.

The fast pace and excellent "rubber reality" special effects would prove utterly meaningless if *Elm Street* did not boast strong characterizations and potent themes. On the first matter, young Heather Langenkamp's performance as the final girl is rousing. She portrays a real-seeming young woman who in turns proves sincere, exhausted, determined, defeated and victorious. As written by Craven and performed by Langenkamp, Nancy is a rarity in the horror genre: an intelligent and insightful youth who is capable of connecting the important things in her life.

Only Nancy can recognize the link between worlds for what it is, and look below the surface of reality because she is already trained to do so, through family history. Nancy is prepared in her battle with Freddy because, one senses, she has already detected the dark truth lurking beneath the affluent surface of Elm Street. She has suffered her

parents' divorce, her father's absence, and her mother's alcoholism.

Nancy is even compared explicitly to Hamlet, the melancholy and probing Prince of Denmark conceived by Shakespeare. In a classroom scene that eerily echoes one in *Halloween* and features Laurie Strode, Nancy's teacher notes that Hamlet stamps out the lies of his mother, an act which Nancy herself will repeat during the course of the film. Freddy is the canker, that rotten thing in human nature that must be exposed. The *Elm Street* philosophy suggests that digging beneath the surface, searching for the truth, is both a blessing and curse. Nancy broaches difficulties head on, or as her mother succinctly notes: "You face things. That's your nature. That's your gift. But sometimes, you've got to turn away too."

So the key to defeating her Freddy, at least according to Marge, is something that goes against Nancy's most prominent characteristic. She must turn her back on the dream demon. She must take back all the energy she gave him.

In other words, some amount of denial may be desirable, healthy even, but first you must know what you're denying. This is Nancy's crisis: knowing when to dig for truth and confront the liars, and when to turn her back on the corruption and lies she has discovered.

Another interesting element is Craven's depiction of the contemporary American family unit. The first adult seen is Tina's mother, who awakens her daughter from a night terror and subsequently scolds her. She is then interrupted by an obviously drunk boyfriend who tactlessly asks: "Are you coming back to the sack or what?" Later, the film's dialogue informs the audience that Tina's father abandoned the family ten years earlier.

Nancy's father is better only by a matter of degrees. Donald Thompson is accusatory and patronizing to his daughter. Even though is nearly an adult, he refers to her condescendingly as "baby." When Nancy can advance his investigation, however, he does not hesitate to exploit her as bait.

Nancy's mother is negatively depicted too. An alcoholic who keeps the vodka bottle handy in a nearby linen closet, Marge boasts the protective instincts of a mother but no notion whatsoever how to channel them effectively. She installs bars on the doors and windows of the family home, but is unaware that such devices will not keep the wolves at bay. Horror invades the house through nightmares, not by knocking on the front door.

Also, Marge and Donald—like all the Elm Street parents—are murderers. They are vigilantes who killed Freddy when the legal system failed to provide justice. Their repressed feelings of guilt and indeed, their bloody sin, are passed onto Nancy in the form of the demonic Krueger. Thus, *Elm Street* literalizes the notion that the sins of the father are passed onto the children. Whether that sin be deficit spending, a huge national debt, a compromised environment or the revenge of a dream demon, the next generation will pay in blood and treasure for the misdeeds of the previous one.

A Nightmare on Elm Street is truly a watershed event. It is a bubbling wellspring of creativity, packed with ideas that have tremendous currency in the genre. The film provides horror with perhaps its most notorious boogeyman in Freddy Krueger. It similarly develops the idea of the final girl to include the notion that she must actively participate in her own continued survival (hence Nancy's sudden fascination with self-defense manuals), and, of course, makes dreams the territory for many future cinematic battles of rubber reality. Most of all, however, this film is unerringly and continuously scary.

Freddy Krueger is not the popular figure of fun he would later become, watered down by lesser directors. Instead he's a real troll, a mean-spirited little thug who likes to torment kids and suddenly, by supernatural means, is given the capacity to do so. Wearing a filthy sweater and a tatty old hat, he's that repellent and despised *other*, a child molester and creep. He's a sadist who delights in the pain of others and perhaps the scariest thing about him is that his wrath is inescapable. We may not have to go to the ocean for a swim and face a great white shark, as in *Jaws*. We may even avoid the shower for a time, the venue of terror in *Psycho*. But sleep—those little slices of death—are unavoidable. Even if we're hopped up on No-Doze and Mountain Dew, dreams will come. So Freddy isn't just eternal, he's unavoidable, and that's a scary premise that makes *A Nightmare on Elm Street* so powerful. We've all experienced nightmares from which we can't awake, and faced the possibility that they might recur. Many people might even believe the old wives' tale that if you die in a dream, you're really dead. So the fear so imaginatively conceived by Wes Craven for this film is totally universal. That's why Freddy lives. Because we've all seen a dream stalking.

LEGACY: *A Nightmare on Elm Street* initiated a rubber reality revolution, and spawned five popular cinematic sequels in the 1980s alone. The 44-episode syndicated series *Freddy's Nightmares* aired from 1988 to 1990. Furthermore, two additional sequels (one in 3-D) came in the 1990s. And in 2003, Freddy returned to the big screen in *Freddy*

vs. Jason. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* also jump-started Wes Craven's film career, and he directed three more high-profile horrors in the 1980s. Robert Englund, Krueger himself, became the reigning king of horror icons.

The Prey

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Debbie Thureson (Nancy); Steve Bond (Joel); Lori Lethin (Bobbie); Robert Wald (Skip); Gayle Gannes (Gail); Philip Wenckus (Greg); Jackson Bostwick (Mark O'Brien); Jackie Coogan (Lester Tile); Connie Hunter (Mary Sylvester); Ted Hayden (Frank Sylvester); Garry Goodrow (Sgt. Parson); Carel Struycken (The Monster).

CREW: New World Pictures and Essex Present a Summer Brown Production, a Film by Edwin S. Brown. *Film Editor:* Michael Barnard. *Director of Photography:* Teru Hayashi. *Music:* Don Peake. *Executive Producer:* Joe Steinman. *Produced by:* Summer Brown. *Special Makeup and Effects:* John Carl Buechler. *Wildlife Photography:* Gary Gero. *Climbing Stunts:* Don Wilson. *Screenplay by:* Summer and Edwin Brown. *Directed by:* Edwin Scott Brown. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Six young adults, Nancy (Thureson), Joel (Bond), Bobbie (Lethin), Skip (Wald), Gail (Gannes) and Greg (Wenckus) hike into the woods at the Northpoint, Keen Wild, unaware that a couple—the Sylvesters (Hayden, Hunter)—were recently axe-murdered there while camping. The first night of the hike, Gail and her boyfriend Greg are murdered by the unseen, monstrous assailant (Struycken), but the killer hides their bodies so their fate is unknown to the campers.

Over Nancy's objections, the others decide to continue their vacation and commence mountain climbing nearby, even as Forest Ranger Lester Tile (Coogan) dispatches his deputy, Mark O'Brien (Bostwick) to find the kids and the missing Sylvester couple. The killer strikes again, pushing Joel and Skip from a mountaintop to their doom and leaving Bobbie and Nancy to fend for themselves. They take off running, the killer in pursuit. Will forest ranger O'Brien arrive in time to rescue them? And even if he does, will he prove a match for the deranged, burned, giant gypsy wild man?

COMMENTARY: An unholy low-budget combination of the “wild mountain man” film, like *Just Before Dawn* (1983), *The Final Terror* (1985) and *Wrong Turn* (2003), and the *Friday the 13th*-style slasher film Edwin Scott Brown’s *The Prey* emerges as a rather accomplished, and terrifying effort, one made doubly so by the location shooting which augments the theme that the teens are not welcome, nor likely to survive, in the domain of the forest.

There’s a horrifying and effective decapitation by axe early in *The Prey*, and then the film cuts to extreme close-ups of nature footage shot in the forest. The audience is treated to views of centipedes, frogs, spiders, etc. There are long shots of the gorgeous mountains, a raccoon near a babbling brook, a spider-web, a hawk cruising overhead searching for prey.

Then, in direct contrast to these shots, the camera captures the image of a van pulling up, with bellowing vacationers—*teenagers*—ignoring these elements of nature. They treat the land as if they own it. As in many films of this type, the teenagers commit some transgression that assures their doom. Often times, it’s disrespect (like sex in the forest); here the message is definitely environmental. One teenager blasts the radio in the woods ... and you just know she’s got to pay for her callous disregard of Mother Nature.

Some reviewers have concluded that the stock footage nature shots are padding ... a way to lengthen a film too short for a feature release. That may be true, but the nature footage also serves a rather interesting and unique thematic purpose. It serves as an explicit reminder to the audience that the teens have treaded into a domain where they are no longer in control, and furthermore, that nature is a force to be reckoned with. They experience “push-back” not just from the scarred mountain man, but from the combined forces of nature itself, which seem to view them as invaders.

Late in the film, for instance, the forest ranger, Mark, discovers a corpse. This gruesome find is inter-cut with footage of vultures high up on a tree limb. The connection between the two shots is clear. The dead body is no longer a “person” but has joined the food chain of the pitiless forest, and will be treated as such.

The Prey’s focus on “natural” images reminds the viewer at all times that the mountain man—who is comfortable in these surroundings—has the home team advantage in any face-to-face conflict. Nature is *his* ally, because he lives in harmony with it. For instance, at the teens’ campsite earlier in the film, nature seems to come to life and encroach

on the interlopers. Snakes slither forward, owls land nearby and nature focuses on the unaware, the oblivious, just as the mountain man predator also approaches. Ultimately, it's an attack from several fronts.

Perhaps the film could have done with fewer "nature" shots and still hammered home this point, but the inclusion of the much-derided stock footage actually grants *The Prey* a kind of artistic perimeter to work within.

The focus on the "living forest" also serves as a counterpoint, after a fashion, to the *Friday the 13th* films, which—as they progressed from sequel to sequel—became increasingly lazy and couldn't be bothered to provide such crucial horror elements as atmosphere or mood, let alone character. By contrast, it's clear in *The Prey* that this is not Jason's "silent," unoccupied *Hollywood* forest, but rather a living, breathing location teeming with life and vying agendas. That's an important distinction, because this is very much a man vs. nature story.

For horror aficionados, *The Prey* remains a superior (and vastly underrated) film of its genre because it reaches a fever pitch of terror near the climax. There's a slow-motion escape attempt by the two surviving campers, Bobbie and Nancy, and it's inter-cut brilliantly with the pursuit of the killer, who is running at full speed. It's quite harrowing, and more than that, adroit from a technical point of view. The technique of combining slow-motion victims with fast-moving pursuer visually grants the sense of the girls trying to escape, but getting nowhere.

The violence is intense. And delightfully, *The Prey* doesn't skimp on gore, either. Greg's throat is torn open by a monstrous clawed hand, and after a lengthy P.O.V. stalk sequence (replete with heart-pounding sound effects), a camper is decapitated, his wife is murdered, and the gore is all quite superior for the time.

The slasher film paradigm goes native in *The Prey*. Because the psychotic killer is a deranged, burned mountain man, *The Prey* opens with a deadly preamble (set in 1948) that explains his bizarre origins. The organizing principle is the woods (or nature, itself), which provides false scares (like snakes, owls, vultures), a location (a place to camp), a bunch of useless authority figures (particularly Jackie Coogan's character), a campfire tale, and much more.

Nancy serves as the film's final girl, the plucky character who seems

more clued in than her friends, and who detects danger early (like noises in the forest). But what makes *The Prey* a valuable—even daring—variation on the formula is the films’ very original sting in the tale/tail that follows an intense final chase. Although some folks will no doubt complain about this epilogue, criticizing it as somehow misogynist in conception, it logically explains precisely (with the sound effect of a baby crying) how Nancy survives a long summer in the woods (in the killer’s den) ... and I’d never seen this ending in a slasher film before. It’s quite cutthroat, quite stunning, quite unexpected, and entirely over-the-top. Told only with sound effects against the ever-present backdrop of the forest, the mountain and the rivers, this ending will make your spine tingle.

At times, *The Prey* reminded me strongly of *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and other “savage” films where civilized people go out into the wild and bring all the accouterments of modern society with them ... only to find them useless and out-of-place when confronted with a raving, brutal wild man (or men). *The Prey* certainly isn’t as intense or successful a film as *Hills*, but it deserves mention, for being in the same school of horror films and presenting a fair amount of scares and creeps. It’s one of those modest, low-budget 1980s horror films (like *The Children*) that is better than its reputation suggests. If you can get past the stock footage and see that it serves a thematic purpose, that is.

Silent Night, Deadly Night

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“A less than inspiring script leads dull characters to do painfully uninteresting things. *Silent Night, Deadly Night* is not the first of its type, and it is certainly not the best. If this yuletide tripe doesn’t turn folks completely away from this form of Christmastime cinema, then they’d do well to check out Bob Clark’s *Black Christmas*, or even Lewis Jackson’ *Christmas Evil*.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lilyan Chauvin (Mother Superior); Gilmer McCormick (Sister Margaret); Toni Nero (Pamela); Robert Brian Wilson (Billy at 18); Charles Dierkop (Killer Santa); Linnea Quigley (Denise); Randy Stumpf

(Andy); Britt Leach (Mr. Simms); Tara Buckman (Mother); Will Hare (Grandpa); Leo Gater (Tommy); Jeff Hansen (Father); Eric Hart (Mr. Levitt); A. Madeline Smith (Sister Ellen); H.E.D. Redford (Captain Richard); Danny Wagner (Billy at 8); Jonathan West (Billy at 5); Amy Stuyvesant (Cindy); Max Robinson (Officer Hermes); Nancy Borgenich (Mrs. Randall); Michael Alvarez (Jim).

CREW: SlayRide Inc., Tri-Star Pictures. *Casting:* Stanzi Stokes, Debbie Rubinstein. *Utah Casting:* Marcia Reider. *Music:* Perry Botkin. *Film Editor:* Michael Spence. *Director of Photography:* Henning Schellerup. *Co-Executive Producers:* Scott J. Schneid, Dennis Whitehead. *Special Effects Makeup:* Karl Wesson. *Stunt Coordinator:* Frank Bare. *Story by:* Paul Caimi. *Written by:* Michael Hickey. *Produced by:* Ira Richard Barmak. *Directed by:* Charles E. Sellier, Jr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On Christmas Eve 1971, little Billy and his family visit insane Grandpa at the Utah Mental Facility and the old man warns the child that Santa punishes naughty children. Later that night, a thug disguised as Santa (Dierkop) robs a convenience store, guns down Billy's dad (Hansen) and attempts to rape his mother (Buckman) before slitting her throat. By 1974, Billy is in an orphanage with his younger brother and still dealing with the horrors and trauma he now associates with the Christmas season ... pain made worse by the cruel, abusive and draconian treatment by the Mother Superior (Chauvin). Ten years later, in 1984, a full-grown Billy (Wilson) gets a job at Ira's Toys thanks to the ministrations of kindly Sister Margaret (McCormick). But when Christmas arrives, he is asked to play the store Santa Claus and this sends him on a rampage, attacking and murdering all those who have been "naughty." He kills the other store employees for engaging in illicit sex, murders two teenagers, decapitates a sledger, and then makes a run for the orphanage, where he plans to wreak revenge on the Mother Superior who was once so cruel to him. Meanwhile, the police are hot on Billy's trail.

COMMENTARY: On its release, *Silent Night, Deadly Night* was protested by self-righteous Christian and parents groups across the United States. These self-appointed guardians of our morality disapproved of the film because it featured a killer in the guise of Santa Claus, and they feared this would traumatize children. In the first case, this fear is silly, since a Santa Claus axe murderer had actually appeared in horror history as early as 1972's *Tales from the Crypt* with no perceptible damage to juvenile psychology. In the second case, the protesters should have actually screened the film they had such objections over, because it addresses something important.

As long as adults abuse children, *Silent Night, Deadly Night* suggests, those children will grow up to be terrors themselves, and the cycle of violence will continue.

Silent Night, Deadly Night is a pseudo-slasher film about a spree killer named Billy. The film boasts what just may be the final word on the deadly preamble ingredient in the slasher paradigm. Here, on a trip to a Utah mental facility, Jim is left alone with his Grandpa, who starts telling him horrible things. “You scared, ain’t ya?” he asks, after telling Billy that Christmas Eve is the scariest night of the year because Santa punishes bad children. Either the old man is sadistic, demented or playing a joke, but his words are taken to heart by the five-year-old. Then, as if this disturbing scene weren’t traumatizing enough, a convenience store robber wearing a Santa Claus outfit attacks his family on the road. Before Billy’s eyes, Santa attempts to rape Mom, but settles for slitting her throat. He guns Daddy down.

And so begins Billy’s long descent into madness, which culminates with his spree, dressed as Santa. Between his grandfather’s words and the actions of a man he mistakes for the real Santa, Billy creates the image of a monstrous avenger, a murderer who attacks anybody he deems naughty. Even the color red sets Billy off.

Billy ends up with his baby brother in Saint Mary’s Home for Orphaned Children, where he is victimized by the Mother Superior. When he experiences a nightmare about Santa, the Mother Superior ties him to his bed. At other times, the Mother Superior lashes and beats the boy with a belt. When he sees a couple having sex, he is punished. “When we do something, we are always caught, and punished,” Billy is warned. “Punishment is absolute. Punishment is necessary.” Through this experience in a supposedly Christian home, Billy realizes that life is cruel and that many people seek to impose their opinions of right and wrong on others. Santa Claus, he begins to suspect, may have been right to judge. Punishment is absolute, punishment is necessary. Old St. Nick is an angel of death and the hand of God’s wrath. And being naughty is interpreted as a sexual thing, because of what he was punished for.

By 1984, when Billy is asked to play Santa at a local toy store, he interprets that as meaning he is now the one in the position to judge who has been naughty and who has been nice. When he intervenes in a rape, Billy’s “justice” kicks in. And from there, the spree is on. The moral of this highly didactic film is that parents and churches shouldn’t treat children cruelly to discipline them, to keep them in line. Furthermore, the punishment shouldn’t be draconian because

violence—even in the name of discipline—is still violence. Once taught violence, the children will act violently. And thus killers like Billy are born. The conclusion finds Billy dead, but the “curse” passed onto his little brother, evidence that the cycle of violence and abuse continues.

The organizing principle is Christmas. It’s the event, and time of year that causes Billy to express his rage. The setting provides the killer’s costume (as Santa Claus) and set pieces for murder, including a *coup de grâce* involving a decapitation on a sled in the snow. Yet, despite the presence of such common slasher elements as the deadly preamble, the breast part of the movie, the organizing principle and so on, the movie healthily diverges from formula. Instead of focusing on a faceless killer, Billy comes from the same school as the killer in *Maniac* (1980) and *Don’t Go in the House* (1980). He’s the protagonist and antagonist simultaneously, the focus of the plot.

Those who protested *Silent Night, Deadly Night* missed that critical fact. Because by being the focus, Billy becomes sympathetic. He commits terrible deeds, but the audience sympathy is always with him. He’s not a faceless, motiveless killer with a machete, hacking up young horny teens. To the contrary, he’s an abused loner who tried to make his way in the world, but suffered the loss of his family, and the cruelty of the Catholic orphanage. Perhaps the real reason that Christian groups had a problem with *Silent Night, Deadly Night* had nothing whatsoever do with the appearance of the serial killer as Santa Claus, but in the film’s depiction of the Mother Superior as a sadistic, narrow-minded tyrant. Perhaps that was the real image they would have preferred that children not see.

Silent Night, Deadly Night is one of the better holiday slasher films, because it takes the time to build a character, Billy, and tell his story in a fashion that garners sympathy. The film is more human than some slashers, because it doesn’t depend solely on butchery set pieces. In fact, Billy doesn’t actually go postal until late in the film, and this may be the least interesting stretch in the movie.

Horror films are all about pushing boundaries, shattering taboos, especially in ways that take the audience aback, horrify it. This movie accomplishes that by engendering empathy for a boy who has truly been given a bum deal in life. Every act Billy commits adheres to a certain sort of twisted logic and, given his history, is not unexpected. The film also boasts a terrific closing line. “*You’re safe now. Santa Claus is gone.*” Since many children have grown up with the fear of sitting on Santa Claus’s lap (he is a red-cheeked old man, after all), the

film even plumbs real life terrors in an interesting way.

LEGACY: *Silent Night, Deadly Night* benefited tremendously from all the publicity regarding parent groups' protests of the film, and went on to become a substantial home video hit. It initiated a franchise of low-quality, direct-to-video sequels. Since Billy died at the end of the first film, his brother picked up the mantel of the Santa Claus killer in *Silent Night, Deadly Night Part 2* (1987); that character returned as a telepathic, dream-inhabiting zombie in *Silent Night, Deadly Night III: Better Watch Out* (1989). Then the series really went off the rails with unconnected sequels including *Initiation: Silent Night, Deadly Night 4* (1990) and the fifth installment, *Silent Night, Deadly Night 5: The Toy Maker* (1992).

The Terminator

★★★★

Critical Reception

“[A] lean, slick thriller that managed the impossible: It turned Arnold Schwarzenegger’s wooden clunkiness into an asset ... Schwarzenegger’s deadpan delivery and Teutonic accent are both menacing and darkly comic. Director Cameron adeptly choreographs the chases and graceful gunplay, and Hamilton is surprisingly touching as the cyborg’s would-be victim.”—“Cinescape Picks the 25 Greatest Action Movies of All Time,” *Cinescape Presents*, Volume 6, Number 3, 2000, page 93.

“[I]t’s an action movie, a roller coaster ride, a sci-fi/horror romp that delivers the goods with style and good humor, and although it’s among the most imaginative and ingenious of its kind, it’s also rather stupid.”—Jake Horsley, *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery, 1958–1999*, Volume # 1. The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1999, page 297.

“Nobody saw this one coming. A movie where you took that weightlifter guy seriously? The title sounded like this week’s action thriller about an assassin. What we got instead was a thought-provoking, occasionally romantic, action-packed City on the Edge of Forever with nasty robots, and a series of legends began, one named Arnold, one named James Cameron, and one named The Terminator. It’s amazing the value Cameron was able to get for such a low-budgeted work, but it all works wonderfully. Linda Hamilton really makes it work, but Michael Biehn, in particular, must be credited for

the insane intensity he brought to his character. As much as Arnold as a machine built to look like a man, Biehn's Kyle Reese is the exact opposite, and Cameron deserves all of the credit for pulling this film together out of nothing and delivering a film you just know will be admired for decades, if not centuries, to come.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

“Time-travel stories are always full of holes when you examine them. Why doesn’t Skynet just go back in time and seize power *back then* instead of chasing down genetic lines? And why does a cyborg need a human form if it’s indestructible anyway? Why does Arnie need a motorcycle? Does it matter? It’s all good.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Arnold Schwarzenegger (The Terminator); Michael Biehn (Kyle Reese); Linda Hamilton (Sarah Connor); Lance Henriksen (Vukovic); Paul Winfield (Lt. Traxler); Rick Rossovich (Matt); Bess Motta (Ginger); Earl Boen (Dr. Silverman); Dick Miller (Gun Shop Clerk); Bruce M. Kerner (Desk Sergeant); Stan Yale (Derelict); Tony Mirelez (Station Attendant); Bill Paxton (Punk Leader); Brad Rearden (Punk); Brian Thompson (Punk); William Wisher Jr. (Policeman).

CREW: MGM, Orion Pictures and Hemdal Present a Pacific Western Production of a James Cameron Film. *Film Editor:* Mark Goldblatt. *Director of Photography:* Adam Greenberg. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Casting:* Stanzi Stokes. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Bruce M. Kerner. *Special Terminator Effects:* Stan Winston. *Special Visual Effects:* Fantasy II. *Executive Producers:* John Daly, Derek Gibson. *Producer:* Gale Anne Hurd. *Acknowledgment to the works of:* Harlan Ellison. *Written by:* James Cameron, Gale Anne Hurd. *Directed by:* James Cameron. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In A.D. 2029, a nuclear war between humans and advanced machines is being waged, and the human race is finally on the verge of lasting victory. But the machines send a killing cyborg, a T-100 known as a “Terminator” (Schwarzenegger), back in time to 1984 to kill Sarah Connor (Hamilton), the mother of the 2029 human resistance leader, General John Connor. The human forces respond by sending back someone to stop the Terminator and protect Sarah, the determined foot soldier, Kyle Reese (Biehn).

In 1984 Los Angeles, the Terminator uses the yellow pages and methodically begins massacring people named Sarah Connor. As the

police put the clues together and realize a serial killer is murdering Connors, the Terminator tracks Sarah to a club called Tech Noir. But Kyle intervenes at the last moment and saves Sarah, whisking her away from the club and beginning an all-night chase that will go from police station, to highway to motel, to a Cyberdyne factory, all with the merciless, relentless Terminator just one step behind. In the final battle, Kyle is killed, but Sarah manages to crush the Terminator inside some industrial machinery. Later, she learns that she is pregnant with Kyle's son ... the future leader of the human revolutionary forces, John Connor.

COMMENTARY: Some high-impact chase scenes dominate *The Terminator*, an unrelenting chase and time travel film in which the future mother of mankind's saviour must battle with a device called a Terminator, a machine in human form sent back to the year 1984 to kill her.

The egoism evident in some of *The Terminator*'s narrative twists is truly astonishing at times. 1980s America, the film reveals, is the focal point of all human civilization. Like *Critters* (1985) or *The Hidden* (1987), the notion is that in all the worlds of the universe and in all times, our time—the time when *we* live—is the most crucial one and will draw aliens, cyborgs, you name it! This level of self-centeredness in the horror cinema may be the result of the pervasive fear of nuclear apocalypse, a fear that the 1980s generation may be the last. *The Terminator* indeed posits that a nuclear war is unavoidable, though the war isn't a result of human aggressions so much as foolishness: permitting machines to control the trigger on the nuclear stockpile.

The Terminator depicts a post-nuclear human existence in grim terms. Human bones and skulls are the new Earth's terra firma, sometimes six or seven deep (a chilling image), and humans huddle together in underground sewer culverts. In one wickedly satirical moment, two filthy, ragged human children are depicted sitting together shivering before the flickering, reflected image on a TV set. On closer inspection, the TV set is revealed to be a burned-out, destroyed shell, with a fire inside providing heat and the illumination. Human technology from a society dedicated to entertainment and leisure still serves its purpose, but not in the way it was designed.



He'll be back. A cyborg from the future (Arnold Schwarzenegger) takes aim in *The Terminator*.

The scenes set in the 1980s occur mostly at night and the overriding feel of *The Terminator* is a world in twilight, perpetually between waking and sleeping, before apocalypse but with the deadly future already inscribed in the mechanisms of destiny. In scenes set at a club called Tech Noir and in the Terminator's interactions with humans (including a nasty punk played by Bill Paxton), this world of night seems a cold, de-humanizing place. That may be the film's finest conceit: that a metal shell on flesh sheathing can masquerade successfully among man virtually unnoticed. He can buy guns, rent a motel room and move through the society's flotsam and jetsam without anyone questioning what dwells beneath. It's that feeling, again, of the Jekyll-Hyde, image vs. reality duality on display through the 1980s. Here, mankind has turned his thinking over to machines, a fatal error, and is so separated from his fellow man that he can't detect an enemy in his midst.

The antidote to this techno-punk world, *The Terminator* suggests, is human love and connectedness. Kyle Reese and Sarah Connor fall in love during their night on the run, and their child—the fruit of that love—is the one who will rally mankind to a new sense of community and dedication against an intractable, unfeeling enemy. Implicit in this scenario is a criticism of the world as it stands now; a criticism that love, perhaps, “has left the building” in 1980s America. Murder is as easy as looking through the Yellow Pages, and the dark nighttime streets are filled with winos and the homeless, disenfranchised strangers that no one seems to love or care for. The police are good-natured but ineffective, and even a staff psychologist (played memorably by Earl Boen) is incapable of feeling empathy. These men are putting in their time, doing their jobs, but again—the world seems devoid of human compassion. Kyle Reese, who comes from the world re-built by John Connor, returns to save Sarah Connor, but he—as a member of the future community—also understands the components of love, including self-sacrifice. This is the “seed” he brings to lonely, isolated Sarah.



In one night, they loved a lifetime's worth. Time-traveler Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) and his ward Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) get intimate in James Cameron's breakthrough hit, *The Terminator*.

Of all the *Terminator* films, this first effort remains the best, perhaps because even in its message about love it boasts the unsentimental heart of a low-budget exploitation flick. The special effects are good, but more on the bloody side than the later efforts. Also, *The*

Terminator doesn't grasp vainly for deep characters or complex themes: This is basically a non-stop, all-night chase with only a few nods towards social commentary. The focus is plainly on dramatically staged action and Arnold's expressionless, off-handed, extreme violence (the actor's trademark). He doesn't really act in this movie: He *is* the terminator, simultaneously deadpan, wooden and mechanical. That's a compliment, by the way, and it's certainly this role and his signature lines such as "I'll be back" that made him a star and a pop culture icon.

In Cameron's horror oeuvre, motherhood looms large. Ripley's maternal instincts clash with an Alien Queen's in *Aliens* (1986), and Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor learns she will be the mother of a future resistance leader in *The Terminator*. This eventuality means that Sarah has to get into fighting shape fast, overcome her lassitude and diffidence and become a warrior herself. Throughout the film, and through her emotionally satisfying relationship with Kyle, she undergoes a process of self-actualization that grows commonplace among the final girls of the latter 1980s. Personal survival is not enough any more. The weight of the entire world (and future) rests on Sarah's shoulders.

A lawsuit against *The Terminator* was filed by Harlan Ellison claiming that the film infringed on some of his literary creations and conceits. Ultimately, however, the time travel shtick in *The Terminator* is not that important. It serves as entree to a slick, nighttime 1980s world of the streets, a fringe place where characters' hearts are forged and tested in battle. The emotional truths in this seemingly simple action film, as well as its dark stance on the inevitability of apocalypse and the decline of our comfort culture, are more important than the scenario which finds Reese and the Terminator deposited in 1984. *The Terminator*—the dark night of the human soul? Perhaps, perhaps not, but the glory of this film is that it leaves its audiences pondering the future and the world we hand to the next generation.

LEGACY: *The Terminator* was the sleeper hit of 1984, and spawned two sequels. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) saw the return of Arnold Schwarzenegger, this time as a good cyborg fighting a shape shifter (Robert Patrick). *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) found a young adult John Connor facing his destiny and the inevitable nuclear war that would bring the future into the present.

1985

March 11: Mikhail Gorbachev is the new leader of the Soviet Union.

April 13: “We are the World” from USA for Africa tops the U.S. singles chart.

April 23: Responding to pressure from its most successful competitor Pepsi, the Coca-Cola Company reformulates its soft drink Coke, and introduces “New Coke” to the world. New Coke is an unmitigated commercial disaster and “old” (or classic) Coke is re-introduced in July 1985.

May 5: Over the objections of 82 U.S. Senators, President Reagan visits a cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where Nazi SS soldiers are buried.

May 22: Premiering in over 2,100 theaters is the Sylvester Stallone ode to patriotism Rambo: First Blood Part 2. The film grosses over \$32 million its first week. Just one question: “Do we get to win this time?”

July 25: It is revealed that movie legend Rock Hudson has contracted AIDS, putting a human, recognizable and beloved face on the epidemic. He dies from the affliction on October 2.

October 7: The cruise liner, Achille Lauro is hijacked by Palestinian terrorists. A passenger from New York is murdered and tossed overboard.

October 10: Orson Welles, auteur of Citizen Kane (1941), dies from heart failure.

November 9: On Princess Diana’s first visit to America, President Reagan forgets her name, and in his toast refers to her as Princess “David.”

November 19: President Reagan meets Mikhail Gorbachev at a summit in Geneva.

Biohazard

½ ★

Critical Reception

“If you can tell me what this flick is about, I’m all ears. Getting Angelique Pettyjohn topless as soon as possible, that I get, though her

breasts are so genuinely frightening it's hard to imagine anyone being turned on by her semi-nudity. The rest is a bit of a mystery. Forget the nonsensical plot, the lousy effects (the gallons of blood look like Ragu spaghetti sauce), and the dialogue so awful that it makes your ears itch. There are always desperate actors with some talent around who will work for cheap or free—could none be found? The cast stumbling over their lines is the most entertaining aspect of the movie ... and it's not all that entertaining, either.”—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Aldo Ray (General Randolph); Angelique Pettyjohn (Lisa Martyn); William Fair (Mitchell Carter); Frank McDonald (Mike Hodgson); David Pearson (Reiger); Christopher Ray (Bio-Monster); Arthur Paxton (Dr. Williams); Charles Roth (Jack Murphy); Carroll Borland (Rula Murphy); Richard Hench (Roger); Loren Crabtree (Jenny); George Randall (Dumpster Man); Brad Arrington (Chambers); Ray Lawrence (Mayfeld); Robert King (Sheriff Miller); Mike Bonaria (Decker); Robin Shurtz (Richard); Michael Bober (Jimmy); Bret Miller (Cliff); Steve Wellese (Walker); Liam Stone (Hench).

CREW: 21st Century Presents a Viking Films International Production of a Fred Olen Ray film. *Directors of Photography:* Paul Elliott, John McCoy. *Special Effects Makeup:* Jon McCallum. *Bio-Monster Suit created by:* Kenneth J. Hall. *Special Effect Animation and Main Title Design:* Bret Mixon. *Musical Score:* Eric Rasmussen, Drew Neumann. *Film Editors:* Miriam L. Preissel, Jack Tucker. *Co-Producer:* Ray Guttman. *Assistant Director:* Donald G. Jackson. *Associate Producers:* Richard Hench, Miriam L. Preissel. *Executive Producers:* Art. Schweitzer, T.L. Lankford. *Severed Head Courtesy of:* Steve Johnson. *Written, Produced and Directed by:* Fred Olen Ray. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 76 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Deep in Death Valley, Dr. Williams (Paxton) and psychic Lisa Martyn (Pettyjohn) experiment with matter transfer, using her unusual concentration abilities to “attract” matter from other dimensions, while two U.S. Senators and General Randolph (Aldo) watch. The experiment goes awry and causes an alien container and small statue to materialize from an unknown reality. During a caravan out of the valley, a short, insect-like alien breaks out of the container and goes on a killing spree.

Special agent Carter (Fair) and Lisa team up to track the monster. Another military man, Cliff (Miller), finds a smaller alien container and keeps it to himself, hoping to make a profit. Before long, Carter

and Lisa are needed to help Cliff when the tiny container is opened and a monstrous creature attacks him. With the help of an unethical soldier of fortune named Reiger (Pearson), Carter and Lisa proceed to track the insectoid to an industrial basement, and there the true nature of the alien enemy is revealed.

COMMENTARY: Rent *Biohazard* on DVD and listen to director Fred Olen Ray's extraordinary commentary. It's a self-deprecating, witty and altogether droll reminiscence. Ray clearly enjoys a sense of humor about his career, his movies, and this low-budget 1980s production. If nothing else, this entertaining commentary is a fascinating window into the low-budget horror filmmaking world of the 1980s. Make no bones about it, the *Biohazard* commentary earns a great big smile.

However, don't stop the commentary and pay any heed to the movie Ray actually made, because *Biohazard* is god awful. That judgment is rendered by a sympathetic critic with an unadulterated affection for the talent behind the movie.

In fact, when somebody first came up with the descriptor, "It's so bad, it's funny," they may have been referring to *Biohazard*. It's a ludicrous, slapdash effort, one so amateurish and unprofessional that it actually craps itself in the last minute and ends with an on-screen blooper. You read that correctly: The film reaches its climactic revelation after an action sequence, and our protagonist, played by William Fair, breaks character and laughingly calls "Cut." Although technically this moment defines the term blooper, it's meant to play as the movie's final sting. If the director evidences such little faith in his material that he ends it on this unprofessional note, why should audiences or critics care to feel differently?

Ray's first film shot in 35mm stars his little son Christopher Ray as a bio-monster come to Earth in a casket-like container to wreak havoc. Shot guerrilla-style on weekends at Vasquez Rocks, the film introduces audiences to a funny lead named Lisa Martyn, played by the kinda frightening-looking Angelique Pettyjohn. *Star Trek* fans will recall this actress with affection because she displayed green hair and donned silver cross-your-heart space-bras in the second season episode "The Gamesters of Triskelion."

In *Biohazard*, serious-minded Lisa has developed unusual psychic abilities after taking a drug called genitrol and now, via her mental energy, "her mind can attract anything," meaning she can contact other worlds and realities. She's helped in this top-secret military-governmental endeavor (in a lab consisting of leftover sets from

Android and Space Raiders) by a truly silly-looking gray helmet.

As Ms. Martyn calls out to the stars as our cosmic ambassador, the film shifts to a black-and-white photo of deep space. That's the film's notion of a "special effect." Meanwhile, the dialogue in this technical scene is delivered by members of the cast as if they've never spoken the English language, or even heard it spoken. The director's commentary reveals that one actor couldn't remember more than one line at a time and had to be fed them in that fashion. And that Aldo Ray had a serious drinking problem. That explains it, I guess.

Biohazard also suffers from flaccid pacing, and a number of bizarre, narrative dead ends. For instance, a local sheriff is introduced late in the film with flourishes of dialogue and characterization, only to promptly disappear without mention or notice before the climax.

Then there's the quasi-comic interlude with a Dumpster diver that is screamingly unfunny. This homeless fella pulls out a poster for Steven Spielberg's *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, and the cute little bio-monster stomps all over it in a fit of childish petulance. Again, this sequence fits in only tangentially to the rest of *Biohazard*.

Finally, there's the scene involving a little old lady in a pick-up truck as she obnoxiously hounds her husband. This woman's voice must be heard to be believed. It has the effect of nails on a blackboard and is grating in the extreme.

To its credit, *Biohazard* is mercifully short (76 minutes), and is replete with blooper reel. The peek behind-the-scenes serves as the umpteenth pointed reminder that this is an amateurish venture held together by spit and polish.

For the curious, the amply proportioned Pettyjohn removes her clothes. Ms. Martyn conveniently eats dinner in a housecoat, so she can slip it right off to reveal a bra too small for her huge bosom. Unfortunately, Pettyjohn also wears a helmet-like platinum wig throughout and it's so weird and immovable that it serves to draw attention away from her more attractive features.

Bloody Wednesday



Cast and Crew

CAST: Raymond Elmendorf (Harry Curtis); Pamela Baker (Dr. Johnson); Navarre Perry (Ben Curtis); Teresa Mae Allen (Elaine Curtis); Jeff O'Haco (Animal); Linda Dana (Pretty Lady); Herb Kronsberg (Walter Burns); Lee Murray (Lou Cramer); John Landtroop (Bellman); Richard Curtis (Pastur); Dale Turner (Jake); Jim Wilkerson (Mr. Grady); Larry Roberts, Kevin Hulbert (F.B.I.); Victor Ochoa (Vandal).

CREW: *Presented by:* Vista International Inc., presents. *Executive Producer:* William F. Messerli. *Producers:* Mark G. Gilhuis, Philip Yordan. *Co-Producers:* Robert Ryan, Susan Gilhuis. *Story and Screenplay:* Philip Yordan. *Music:* Al Sendry. *Directed by:* Mark G. Gilhuis. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Divorcee Harry Curtis (Elmendorf) gets fired from his job at Jake's Auto Shop after disassembling a customer's motor and proving unable to put it back together. After walking nude into a church service (save for a Bible covering his privates), Harry is remanded to a psychiatric ward and his therapist Dr. Johnson (Baker) think he's a time bomb waiting to explode.

Unfortunately, she has no leverage to commit him and Harry returns to society under the care of his business-obsessed brother Ben (Perry), who permits Harry to stay in an abandoned hotel while he gets back on his feet.

For the next several days, Harry is taunted by bizarre hallucinations. He has a run-in with three thugs who try to kill him, is visited by the F.B.I., has ongoing discussions with his favorite Teddy bear, and even fantasizes a sexual relationship with Dr. Johnson. He encounters snakes, relives the suicide of an old hotel patron in room 1327 and meets a ghostly bellhop (Landtroop) who advises him on important matters, including the recovery of lost money hidden in the hotel. Harry loses all grip on reality and purchases a machine gun. Then, one Wednesday, he strides into a busy coffee shop in the city and opens fire on the unsuspecting patrons.

COMMENTARY: On July 18, 1984, a 41-year-old man named James Oliver Huberty killed twenty-one people (and wounded nineteen more) at a McDonald's in San Diego. Huberty's crime spree (with an Uzi and other firearms) became known in some quarters as the McDonald's Massacre and was a national news story. Huberty was fatally wounded by a SWAT officer after the incident. It is believed that he suffered from mental illness, specifically acute schizophrenia.

The day of that terrible crime was a Wednesday. Hence a ripped-from-the-headlines, direct-to-video horror movie entitled *Bloody Wednesday*, which posits a similar spree killing, but one where the facts have been altered, perhaps so no corporate lawsuits are possible. Thus the terror has been translated to a coffee shop in *Bloody Wednesday*, and the killer's name is Harry Curtis, but he too suffers from a form of schizophrenia.

What this film actually depicts in detail is the way that society—from Harry's family to his psychiatrists—fail to understand the danger the man represents. By the time anyone comprehends just how dangerous Harry really is, it's too late, and innocent lives have been lost. Harry starts out by saying that he just can't make things "fit" any more, and from there, his disenchantment escalates to paranoia, and finally, violence. Once weapons are in his possession, it's a foregone conclusion that someone will die. His brother, who is a yuppie businessman and says things like "Jesus, why does this have to happen to me?", is too busy to see the obvious about his sibling.

Bloody Wednesday's opening crawl informs the viewer that "the evening news on television keeps reminding us we live in a violent world"; later, Harry watches war movies on the boob tube, as if shifting the blame to society for massacres of this ilk. Finally, and for most of its running time, the film focuses on Harry's delusions. In some, he's a lover, in others, a hero.

Many of these hallucinations involve his stay at his brother's abandoned hotel, and an imaginary bellboy (who may be a ghost), all material seemingly plucked directly from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).

Essentially, *Bloody Wednesday* meanders about so much that it becomes impossible to understand how and why life leads Harry to that fateful encounter in the coffee shop. The ghost bellhop gives him a machine gun ... but where does he *really* get it if one accepts the belief that the bellhop character is a delusion?

Another ghost confers with Harry about a missing suitcase filled with diamonds, but this is just a narrative blind alley. A Teddy bear also goads Harry to kill. One is reminded that the Son of Sam killer heard voices in his head, but again, one can hardly tell if this is a delusion or a "haunting" at the hotel. Ultimately, Harry even confronts F.B.I. agents who show up at his door but apparently they're hallucinations too. If they're not, how did they know who he was, and why didn't they stop him?

Bloody Wednesday is an awful mess of a movie. It's straight-to-video visual palette is uninspiring and lacks cinematic scope. The acting is terrible, and the melodramatic musical score pounds on and on ominously with little relation to what's actually happening on screen. It's always convenient to rail against a "system that will do nothing," to stop monsters like Harry Curtis, yet the film evidences little indignation that it was so easy for him to get his hands on weapons that turned him from being a dangerous psychopath to a mass murderer.

Indeed, *Bloody Wednesday* muddies the provocative and troublesome issues surrounding a killer like Huberty and the events of that terrible day in July. The film never settles on a reason why he is the way he is—supernatural intervention or psychosis—and that's a pretty irresponsible lapse for a film purportedly based on a true event.

By the end of the decade, other low-budget films, such as the exemplary *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, were vetting similar material but with taste, artistry and intelligence ... three qualities missing from *Bloody Wednesday*. In setting its film on a Wednesday and aping the events surrounding the McDonald's Massacre, *Bloody Wednesday*'s only claim to fame is its bad taste. It wanted to be relevant and current, yet also wants to serve as *The Shining* on the cheap.

Boggy Creek 2 (And the Legend Continues)

★ ½

Critical Reception

"The only thing that saved this movie from a good waste of celluloid was its treatment by the rowdies at *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Too bad Bigfoot didn't accidentally smash into the camera while zipping up his monkey suit."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Charles B. Pierce (Dr. Brian "Doc" Lockhart); Cindy Butler (Leslie); Chuck Pierce (Tim Thorton); Jimmy Clem (Old Man Crenshaw); Serene Hedin (Tanya Yazzie); Rick Hildreth (Deputy Williams); Don Atkins (Otis Tucker); James Tennison (Storekeeper); Charles Potter (Oscar Culpotter); Pat Wagoners (Myrtel Colpotter); Charles Vanderburg (Slogan); Mack Place (Boat Renter); Fabus Griffin (Big Creature); Victor Williams (Little Creature).

CREW: *Presented by:* Arista Films and Charles B. Pierce Pictures. *Music:* Frank McKelvey. *Director of Photography and Film Editor:* Shirak Khojayan. *Creature Costumes:* Bill Khopler. *Written, Produced and Directed by:* Charles B. Pierce. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I smell ya!”—Professor Lockhart’s first words to the legendary Bigfoot-like creature in *Boggy Creek 2 (And the Legend Continues)*.

SYNOPSIS: “Doc” Lockhart (Charles B. Pierce), an anthropology professor at the University of Arkansas, travels with students Tim (Chuck Pierce), Leslie (Butler) and Tanya (Hedin) to the swamps near Texarkana in search of the legendary Boggy Creek monster. Reports of the creature have grown more frequent of late, and inexplicably more violent. In search of the Sasquatch-like ape-man, Lockhart and his students grapple with a mad dog and establish a home camp in the woods, replete with computer sensors capable of detecting the creature by its weight.

After a late night encounter with the monster, Lockhart tracks it down river to the old Crenshaw place. Old Man Crenshaw (Clem) has been lighting fires at night to keep the monster at bay, and the group from the university learns why: He’s been hiding the injured child of Big Boggy Creek.

COMMENTARY: A technically inept follow-up to the quasi-documentary *Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972), *Boggy Creek 2 (And the Legend Continues)* picks up the story of that mythic monster from southern Arkansas while eschewing *cinéma vérité* style and “authentic”-seeming re-enactments. Instead, this sequel from regional filmmaker Pierce, who also directed *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (1977), is a traditional narrative, a fictional film which includes several flashbacks of creature “encounters.” Unfortunately, the movie is bedeviled by poor sound quality, and the director’s insistence that the characters are almost universally centered precisely in each composition.

Playing the lead (was he really the best person for the role?), Pierce makes himself the center of attention so often that the movie feels like an ego trip (*The Prince of Tides* with monkey suits). The helmer spends much time struggling to appear macho. All the while, he directs the other actors in the scene under the guise of being “in character.” “Quiet! Quiet!” “Get over there!” “Move!” He’s constantly guiding scenes from within. This is a guy who can verbally outwit shop

owners, put uppity women in their place, and outmaneuver a redneck who calls him Cuz (short for cousin). Wearing frighteningly short shorts and weighted down with his unpleasant beer-bump gut, this tough-talking professor of anthropology—whose first stop on a forest research expedition is an ammunition run—is not the most appealing of characters.

Of course, Doc is a charmer compared to Old Man Crenshaw, played by Jimmy Clem, a character introduced in the film's final act. He is a fat, unkempt man wearing an overall with a broken strap and no shirt. Patches of hair dot his back and he chews tobacco. Always threatening to unfurl a whale of a stomach, this character is far more frightening than the Boggy Creek creatures.

Since Pierce apparently doesn't possess the capacity to scare his audience, he takes the approach of disgusting it, not just with Crenshaw but with a horrifying flashback wherein a fat man sitting on an outhouse toilet seat sees the monster and soils his pants. The very next scene reveals the man in his backyard while his fat wife, Myrtle, hoses down his pooped pants. This scene is supposed to be humorous, but it's nauseating.

Another scene, a diversion that involves a rabid dog instead, ends with the canine (frothing at the mouth) shot and bleeding. The scene ends in ugly, unsavory fashion with the dying dog lying in a pool of its own blood, breathing rapidly. It's a powerful image and yet thrown in the film's mix for no good reason, and to no effect.

Less disturbing and often funny is Doc's less than careful research into the creature. Instead of following up on facts, gathering forensic information and seeking out (big) footprints, Doc simply goes to the scene of reputed sightings and speculates about what might have happened there. The CSI team, this is not.

To wit, Doc takes his students to a barn where an old man reportedly saw the beast. Doc tells the whole story in glorious detail (with an accompanying flashback) and then concludes that the farmer never awoke from a coma to tell his story. Then how does Doc know what happened? If the only witness to a Boggy Creek sighting is an eyewitness who never awoke from a coma to tell anyone what he saw, the investigation is in deep trouble.

Later, in another amusing scene, Doc must swerve his speeding Jeep to avoid road kill. He stops the vehicle and with his young apprentice Tim (played by Pierce's real-life son) stands over the dead deer. They

speculate wisely about it. “Who knows? Maybe it belongs to the creature,” Doc suggests.

Right, because there’s *never* been any road kill on Arkansas roads before. Then, of course, the deer does prove to be the creature’s, because if there’s any guiding rule in *Boggy Creek 2*, it’s that Doc—the director—is always right.

Not always talented. But always right.

LEGACY: The gang on *Mystery Science Theater* had an amusing go at *Boggy Creek 2* during one of their final seasons on the Sci-Fi Channel. That version is actually preferable viewing to the “canon.”

The Bride

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“*The Bride* is presented earnestly. It’s the very sincerity of the tale—combined with really rotten dialogue—that makes it so ludicrous, even embarrassing at times. The only thing that saves this movie from being a complete disaster is the enchanting backdrop scenery...”—Peter Stack, “*Bride Is a Real Monster*,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, August 16, 1985, page 81.

“Jennifer Beals ... brings beauty and believability to the role of Eva. The rock star Sting is a suitable combination of sensitive teacher and ruthless egomaniac ... But it is David Rappaport as Rinaldo who steals the show ... and his plucky manner serves to pick up an already high-flying story and move it to the rare ground of classic entertainments.”—George Williams, “*This Reincarnation is a Monster of a Hit; Here Comes The Bride*,” *The Sacramento Bee*, August 16, 1985, page S14.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Beals (Eva); Sting (Baron Frankenstein); Anthony Higgins (Clerval); Clancy Brown (Viktor); David Rappaport (Rinaldo); Alexei Sayle (Magar); Phil Daniels (Bela); Veruschka (Countess); Quentin Crisp (Dr. Zahlus); Cary Elwes (Josef); Tim Spall (Paulus); Geraldine Page (Mrs. Baumann); Ken Campbell (Pedlar); Guy Rolfe (Count); Andrew De La Tour (Priest); Tony Haygarth (Tavern Keeper); Jack Birkett (Blind Man); John Sharp (Bailiff).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents a Victor Drai Production of a Franc Roddam Picture. *Music:* Maurice Jarre. *Casting:* Ellen Chenowith. *Associate Producer:* Lloyd Fonveille. *Costume Designer:* Shirley Russell. *Film Editor:* Michael Ellis. *Executive Producer:* Keith Addis. *Production Designer:* Michael Seymour. *Director of Photography:* Stephen H. Burum. *Co-Producer:* Chris Kenny. *Screenplay:* Lloyd Fonveille. *Producer:* Victor Drai. *Stunt Coordinator:* Gerry Crampton. *Directed by:* Franc Roddam. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 119 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I made you for a wedding. Your wedding night has come!”—A lusty Baron Frankenstein (Sting) takes liberties with his latest creation, Eva (Beals), in the staid, pretty *The Bride*.

SYNOPSIS: The arrogant Baron Frankenstein (Sting) creates a mate (Beals) for his monster (Brown). When she doesn’t want him, the creature goes on a mad rampage and Frankenstein’s laboratory is destroyed in a terrible storm.

While Frankenstein christens his beautiful female creation Eva and introduces her into the ways of society, the monster is named Viktor by a friend he meets on the road to Budapest, a street-smart dwarf named Rinaldo (Rappaport). Viktor and Rinaldo join Magar’s circus even as Eva in Vienna begins to question her identity and education by Frankenstein.

When Rinaldo is murdered by corrupt employees at the circus, Viktor exacts revenge and then returns home, only to learn that Eva is rebelling against her master. Baron Frankenstein feels he has waited long enough to claim his bride and attempts to rape Eva, but Viktor intervenes.

COMMENTARY: *The Bride* is not a scary movie, or even a monster movie in the traditionally understood sense. There isn’t a frightening moment in the entire film.

Instead, *The Bride* is a long, languid character piece concerning one of the genre’s greatest icons and his bride. The monster and his would-be spouse travel separately, but along parallel tracks throughout the film, until a last act rendezvous. And Dr. Frankenstein, a role essayed by Sting, serves as the film’s real “monster.”

Although at times it plays as though it’s a sequel to a *Frankenstein* movie never made—which it is—*The Bride* feels refreshingly original and new. Perhaps the best way to enjoy this production is as a feast for the senses and the intellect. It doesn’t get the heart pumping, but

then, that's not *The Bride's* game. Rather it's like the Merchant Ivory, stately, period-piece interpretation of *Frankenstein*, and that approach in itself makes it of interest if not completely successful.

Director Franc Roddam fluidly follows two stories. There's an A plot featuring Viktor and his tragic friend, Rinaldo, and the B plot involving Eva and the good doctor. These similar storylines alternate throughout the drama, so the viewer can compare and contrast. Both Eva and Viktor are in the same boat: They're "infants," in a sense, new to life on Earth (as they've been given life by Dr. Frankenstein). Yet both find new teachers who name them, in Eva's case the wolfish Dr. Frankenstein and in Viktor's case Rinaldo. In one scene, Eva is seen at a dining room table, politely eating chicken, and the film crosscuts immediately to the monster eating chicken on a spit. Later, Eva joins polite society just as Viktor joins the circus. The point is, perhaps, that beauty is invited to the ball, while ugliness is shunned and marginalized.

In a reversal of expectations, however, it is Viktor who discovers true friendship, in his fellowship with Rinaldo. Rinaldo teases Viktor, trusts him, and plots a future. They're best buddies until evil men conspire to separate them permanently. By contrast, Eva lives in a cold, isolating castle and is groomed as Frankenstein's sexual partner. He withholds from Eva the truth about her nature, interferes in her life, and cares only for the fact that he designed her to be his equal in thought and reason. Indeed, Dr. Frankenstein in this film is depicted as a cold, calculating bastard, all ego and arrogance. He's nearly a rapist too. Dr. Frankenstein's desire is not so much to create life as it is to control it. Even though Viktor appears to have gotten a bum deal as an outcast, it is Eva who suffers the most. Society life is as cruel as a circus, and Eva's guide in life is much more cruel and demanding than Viktor's.

Finally, *The Bride* is about two "young" beings learning what it means to be alive, to be human, and—in the end—finding the only other person in the world who can understand them. That narrative point makes the film a love story. After Dr. Frankenstein dies, Eva and the monster are finally together, and though no promises are made, they seem to be an item. The Bride, having seen "internal" ugliness inside the beautiful Dr. Frankenstein, may be ready to love the monster, a creature of inner beauty.

The Bride is bolstered by a winning, underappreciated performance from Clancy Brown as Viktor, and a touching turn by David Rappaport. Although Geraldine Page is wasted in a nothing role, Sting

and Beals do fine work too. It's difficult to work up tremendous enthusiasm for the film as it's slow-paced, brooding and filled with little triumphs rather than particularly exciting or scintillating moments. That a film like this was forged in the mid-1980s at all, with no teenagers, no slashers and no gore on hand, is something of a minor miracle in and of itself.

Cat's Eye



Cast and Crew

CAST: Drew Barrymore (*Our Girl*); James Woods (*Dick Morrison*); Alan King (*Mr. Donatti*); Kenneth McMillan (*Cressner*); Robert Hays (*Johnny Norris*); Candy Clark (*Sally Ann*); James Naughton (*Hugh*); Tony Munafo (*Junk*); Court Miller (*Mr. McCann*); Russell Horton (*Mr. Milquetoast*); Patricia Benson (*Mrs. Milquetoast*); Mary D'Arcy (*Cindy*); James Rebhorn (*Drunk Businessman*); Jack Dillon (*Janitor*); Susan Hawes (*Mrs. McCann*); Sal Richards (*Westlake*); Jesse Doran (*Albert*); Patricia Kalember (*Marcia*); Mike Starr (*Ducky*); Charles Dutton (*Dom*).

CREW: *Presented by:* MGM/UA Entertainment Company and Dino De Laurentiis. *Production Design:* Giorgio Postiglione. *Costume Design:* Clifford Capone. *Film Editor:* Scott Conrad. *Director of Photography:* Jack Cardiff. *Creatures created by:* Carlo Rambaldi. *Music by:* Alan Silvestri. *Screenplay by:* Stephen King. *Producers:* Milton Subotsky, Martha Schumacher. *Casting:* Howard Feuer, Jeremy Ritzer. *Foreground Models:* Emilio Ruiz. *Special Visual Effects:* Barry Nolan. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Jeff Jarvis. *Creature Operators:* Paolo Scipione, Frank Schepler, Steven Willis. *Directed by:* Lewis Teague. *MPAA Rating:*

"Honey, cats don't think."—Sally Ann (Candy Clark) belittles the General to daughter, Amanda (Drew Barrymore).

SYNOPSIS: Evading Cujo and the mad car Christine, a feisty cat called "The General" weaves his way through a trilogy of stories while trying to find a little girl (Barrymore) who is calling out to him for help. In the first tale of the macabre, "Quitter's Inc.," a family man (Woods) desperately trying to quit smoking goes to a company that promises results. The company is run by the mob, and takes backsliding seriously ... so much so that the smoker's family is jeopardized.

In the second story, "The Ledge," the cat makes his way to Atlantic

City, New Jersey, and meets a gambler (Hays) in desperate trouble after carrying on an affair with a mobster's (McMillan) girl. The mobster challenges him to walk the entire perimeter of a skyscraper—on a tiny ledge—as the wind howls all around him. The alternative is certain death.

Finally, in his third adventure, the General meets up with the spunky little girl he was destined to help, Amanda, and realizes that she is imperiled by the arrival of a malevolent gnome in her bedroom. The tiny, armed creature wants to steal Amanda's breath while she sleeps; Amanda's mother Sally Ann (Clark) believes that it is the General who is the real threat, and tosses him out. Now the General must get back inside to do battle with the terrifying troll.

COMMENTARY: In the first few minutes of Lewis Teague's *Cat's Eye*, another Stephen King anthology, the film makes a special and humorous point of reminding audiences of *Cujo*, *Christine* and *The Dead Zone*. This self-reflexive tone launches *Cat's Eye* on precisely the right note, for this is a jaunty, thrilling but ultimately not terribly substantial flick. Unlike the *Creepshow* anthologies, which are caked in blood, gore and murder, *Cat's Eye* feels a bit more fun and sly, a little less hardcore. There's nothing here that's going to provoke nightmares or overly offend the sensibilities.



A cat named the General finds his girl (Drew Barrymore) in this publicity still from the 1985 Stephen King anthology *Cat's Eye*, directed by Lewis Teague.

As one might guess from the title and the synopsis above, the common thread through the three stories is the diligent and heroic General. He's receiving psychic messages from a little girl in danger, and

through the course of the film goes in search of her. In the final story, the General is a key player, duking it out with the mean-spirited troll.

The inaugural tale finds smoker James Woods desperately trying to quite the habit. He visits an outfit run by the Mafia called Quitters Inc. and signs up for their cutthroat program ... one which doesn't permit backsliding. On a first offense, his wife will get electrocuted. The second time, it's his daughter. The third offense will result in his wife's rape, and on the fourth offense (which has only happened 2 percent of the time, we're told), murder is broached.

Unfortunately, Woods' character believes he's smarter than the experts at Quitters Inc., and smokes. He's caught, and then racked with guilt when his family is tortured. This segment looks at the idea of selfishness and asks viewers to contemplate how much they like their luxuries. What is a cigarette worth? What is pleasure worth? Is one person's pleasure worth somebody else's pain? These are not irrelevant questions to ask in the 1980s, a decade of corporate corruption, tax cuts for the rich, and expanding ranks of the homeless.

Cat's Eye's second story, "The Ledge," involves a life-or-death wager and a ledge high atop a skyscraper. Robert Hays, playing an aging tennis pro and gambler, must navigate the perimeter of the building if he wishes to live and to take away his girlfriend, the wife of nasty mobster Cressner (Kenneth McMillan). This story is fairly basic, and seems reminiscent of some old episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, but it nicely exploits the common fear of heights.

As is the case with most movie anthologies, *Cat's Eye* saves its most potent story for last. The General arrives at the home of "Our Girl" (Barrymore) and takes up residence in her bedroom. Although her mother (Candy Clark) believes the old legend that cats steal children's breath, the truth is somewhat different. Instead, an evil troll arrives, murders Amanda's parrot, and terrorizes the little girl. The General fights back, but Mom still doesn't get the picture and takes the cat to the City Animal Shelter, where it is marked for termination. In the end, the General returns for one more round with the troll. As a cat lover myself, I enjoyed—for once—seeing felines portrayed heroically in a film. This final sequence is buoyed by some excellent and highly detailed special effects work, which matches a life-sized bedroom with a miniature one that the Troll tromps around in. The switch from full-size to miniature is seamless, and the final battle between cat and troll is engaging and fun.

CLOSE-UP: Eye of the Tiger: "[*Cat's Eye*] came about because of an

intersection between Dino De Laurentiis, Stephen King and myself,” says director Lewis Teague. “I had done a film for Dino before that, and we wanted to work together on something. And Dino had produced a Stephen King film or two, I know he did *Firestarter*. And Drew Barrymore was in *Firestarter*. Dino said, ‘Lewis, we make another movie! I want to make a movie with you, Stephen King and Drew Barrymore! What do you think we do?’

“He went out and bought a collection of Stephen King stories, something like *Night Shift*. So *Cat’s Eye* used two short stories from *Night Shift*, and Stephen King wrote a new original short story, and we tied it all together with this silly device of the cat trying to return home to save Drew Barrymore from the troll,” explains the director.

Cat’s Eye marked director Teague’s third 1980s horror film involving animals, which makes him the ideal person to compare working styles between breeds.

“Each animal is motivated by something different,” Teague concludes. “Dogs are motivated by the desire to please, to get approval, so they will perform their tricks to get the approval of their owners or trainers. Cats, on the other hand, don’t give a shit. They’re motivated by food. So we had to have a whole bunch of cats—again, eleven or twelve cats—because as soon as one cat had enough to eat, it would stop working. We’d have to go the next cat, to a hungry cat. Cats are smart, and if they know they’ll get fed, they’ll do it.”

“The biggest problem in ‘The Ledge’ was not having enough money to do the things I wanted to do. That was an expensive sequence to shoot, because we had to build the top of the high rise on a sound stage, and all the backgrounds and the street below were all done with miniatures. The ledge was approximately twelve feet up.”

For this author, the final sequence, pitting troll versus feline, is the best in the show, partly because of the extraordinary special effects.

“The troll was a midget in a troll suit, but that meant he was still about four feet high,” Teague reports. “So in order to make him appear to be three or four inches high, we had to build a set where everything was at least twelve times as large as an ordinary object, which made it very difficult.”

“When you’re shooting a scene in a normal set and you want to move a chair, you just reach over and move it. But on a giant set like that, if you want to move a chair, you have to bring in a forklift and it takes

ten or fifteen minutes. And time is always your enemy when you're shooting a film. So it just made that scene surprisingly difficult to shoot. It's not that matching a miniature set or an over-sized set is a difficult problem to accomplish, it just takes a long time to build everything."

And what about the notion of shooting a horror anthology? "Well, they don't make 'em much any more, for good reason," Teague laughs. "It's a lot more difficult. As soon as the audience starts to get involved in a story or a character, the story is over and you have to shift their attention to a whole new situation. That's why anthology films don't really do that well at the box office. I knew that would be a problem when I accepted the job, but I thought all the elements would be so much fun to work with, and I don't regret it for an instant."

Finally, how does Teague rate his three contributions to 1980s horror films? "Each one had its own challenges that made it difficult," he says. "They were all fairly difficult on one hand and fairly easy on the other hand. *Alligator* was difficult because of the budget restrictions, and the problems of making the alligators credible. *Cujo* was difficult because it was just grueling to shoot complicated scenes with Dee Wallace and Danny Pintauro trapped in the car with the dogs outside, and it was raining and freezing. That was very uncomfortable. *Cat's Eye* was difficult too. It was difficult to make the story work, because the three stories were so disconnected."

The Company of Wolves

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"An imaginative, sensual variation on Little Red Riding Hood, the film takes on the primal, vivid and often nightmarish world of fairy tales and folklore. *Wolves* looks to us to be the blueprint for the Stephen Sondheim musical *Into the Woods*, and its lush, arresting photography and production design foreshadow Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow*."—Cyril Pearl, "Wonderfully Wicked," *Video Business*, October 7, 2002, page 18.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Angela Lansbury (Granny); Graham Crowden (Old Priest); Brian Glover (Amorous Boy's Father); Kathryn Pogson (Young Bride); Stephen Rea (Young Groom); Tusse Silberg (Mother); David Warner

(Father); Micha Bergese (The Huntsman); Sarah Patterson (Rosaleen); George Slowe (Alice); Shane Johnstone (Amorous Boy); Dawn Archibald (Witch Woman); Richard Morant (Wealthy Groom); Danielle Dax (Wolf Girl); Vincent McLaren (Devil Boy); Ruby Buchanan (Dowager); Jimmy Gardner (Ancient); Roy Evans (Eye Patch); Edward Marks (Lame Fiddler); Jimmy Brown (Blind Fiddler).

CREW: ITC Entertainment Present a Palace Production of a Neil Jordan Film. *Film Editor:* Rodney Holland. *Music:* George Fenton. *Costume Designer:* Elizabeth Waller. *Director of Effects Photography:* Peter MacDonald. *Casting Director:* Susie Figgis. *Animatronic Wolf by:* Rodger Shaw. *Special Makeup Effects Designed and Executed by:* Christopher Tucker. *Production Designer:* Anton Furst. *Director of Photography:* Bryan Loftus. *Screenplay by:* Angela Carter, Neil Jordan. *Adapted from her own story by:* Angela Carter. *Executive Producers:* Stephen Woolley, Nik Powell. *Art Director:* Stuart Rose. *Directed by:* Neil Jordan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Once you stray from the path, you’re lost entirely.”—A warning from Granny (Angela Lansbury) to young Rosaleen (Sarah Patterson)

SYNOPSIS: Alice (Slowe) is murdered by wolves when she strays from the path in the woods one night. Her sister Rosaleen visits her grandmother (Lansbury) after the funeral, and Granny fills the girl’s head with stories of men who are wolves on the outside, and men who are wolves on the inside.

One day, while wearing a red riding hood, Rosaleen decides to walk through the woods to her grandmother’s house to hear more tales. She is met by a long-haired, rakish Huntsman (Bergese), who wagers her (for a kiss) that he can beat her to her grandmother’s house. She agrees and makes for Granny’s house, only to find the Huntsman waiting, having murdered the old lady. “What big teeth,” she says, when the Huntsman kisses her. “All the better to eat you with,” he replies.

COMMENTARY: Set amidst a lush nightmare—fairy tale landscape, Neil Jordan’s *The Company of Wolves* is an art film-style, psychosexual horror that gazes at the underpinnings of the famous children’s tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*. The film’s old Granny character, played splendidly by a fat-cheeked Angela Lansbury, explicitly warns an adolescent Rosaleen—whose sexuality may be awaking—that a “wolf may be more than he seems. He may come in many disguises.”

Also warning the young lady to “never trust a man whose eyebrows meet,” Granny clearly equates wolves in the film with sexually aggressive men who want to steal away the gift of virginity, trap a woman, and then go back to the wild, baying at the moon and running with the pack.



Little girls should beware of the Big Bad Wolf (Micha Bergese), at least in *The Company of Wolves* (1985).

Like wolves, the movie points out, men are devourers, hunters. “Straying from the path” thus carries a double meaning: becoming lost in the woods on the way to Granny’s house, and losing one’s way from the strictly enforced code of religious righteousness and chastity. Once seduced by wolves (and thus by man), girls are doomed to run with the wolf pack too, apparently.

The Company of Wolves has already warned against this destiny via a vignette depicting Rosaleen’s meeting with a poor, speechless creature, a girl who has “been” with the wolves. As if to suggest the fear of deflowering and loss of innocence accompanying this fate, *The Company of Wolves* late in the game showcases the loaded image of a blossom turning from pure white to crimson red, symbolizing the full flush of sensuality and sexual lust.

Seductive, erotic and disturbing, though undeniably heavy on the underlying sub-text, *The Company of Wolves* features two competing narratives. In the fairy tale world of glades and wolf men, Granny warns Rosaleen against the dangers of losing her way. Granny is an appropriate guardian of morality, the film's images reveal, since (unlike the blood red moon which brings out the wolves) her skin appears tempered of porcelain—a reflection of her immaculate rectitude.

In the film's second narrative, set in the modern day U.K., a young woman who adorns *red* lipstick (the audience's connection to Little Red Riding Hood) falls into a feverish slumber in her bedroom, and it is the fairy tale story of Rosaleen that represents her phantasm. What this young woman truly dreams about, the movie suggests, is not fairy tales and wolves, but rather the inevitable passage from girlhood to womanhood; from innocence to knowledge; from a world of Teddy bears and dolls to one where the wolves are the ones who want to play, and thus surround her in her bedroom.

The Company of Wolves is a fascinating, psychologically powerful movie that also studies the stories adults tell children. *Little Red Riding Hood* is a frightening tale about innocence threatened; about getting lost; about confronting a monster. Could it be that this monster is merely a coded representation of lust? As Rosaleen follows a trail in an icy, white forest, her red hood the only flash of color on the fantasy landscape, the film visually indicates the manner in which lovely young women are beacons to wolves; and sure enough, the Huntsmen soon finds her. And when he does, he claim to desire only a kiss, though he has also brought a “most remarkable object” with him.

You can translate that last bit for yourself.

Languid and loaded with potent wolf imagery, *The Company of Wolves* also includes a human-to-wolf transformation scene that utilizes some of the special effects breakthroughs of *An American Werewolf in London* and *The Howling*. It's a bloody transformation (perhaps to indicate a blood-engorged one) and the effects have aged poorly, even while the expressionist sets continue to prove convincing, and evocative of a dream world. Although it won't prove everyone's cup of tea, *The Company of Wolves* is a beautiful and thoughtful enterprise, keen-eyed in its symbolism and hypnotic in its dreamy spell. There's also one thought that puts the battle of the sexes, I think, in its rightful perspective:

“If there's a beast in men, it meets its match in women too.”

Creature

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“If I didn’t love *Alien* so much, I’d give it hell for being so scary and effective that it spawned so many damn imitators. This may be the worst of them. I’m not sure if the presence of Klaus Kinski is intended to be campy and hopefully funny, but still fails, or if it is proffered in all seriousness and so is by design unfunny but also unintentionally campy. It’s just one of the things about this flick that make my brain hurt.”—MaryAnn Johanson, *The Flick Filosopher*, movie critic.

“*Creature* is a low-rent ‘*Alien*-type’ shocker that rises to the occasion despite its shortcomings in production and budget. Some clever editing and special effects are put to good use here, but a clever script is nowhere to be found. And while the extraterrestrial beast is the film’s obvious centerpiece, the real star is the inimitable Klaus Kinski. Not for fans of hardcore or high brow sci-fi, but perfectly suitable for those late night viewings.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stan Ivar (Mike Davison); Wendy Schall (Beth Sladen); Lyman Ward (David Perkins); Robert Jaffe (Jon Fennel); Diane Salinger (Melanie Bryce); Annette McCarthy (Dr. Wendy H. Oliver); Marie Laurin (Susan Delambre); Klaus Kinski (Hans Rudy Hofner); John Stinson, Jim McKeny (Astronauts); Buckley Norris, Michael Griswold (Concord Technicians); David Moses (Mission Coordinator).

CREW: Trans World Entertainment Presents a William Malone Film. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Executive Producers:* Moshe Diamant, Ronnie Hadar. *Executives in Charge of Production:* Sunil R. Shah, Moshe Barkat. *Producers:* William G. Dunn, Jr. William Malone. *Director of Photography:* Harry Mathias. *Film Editor:* Bette Cohen. *Music:* Thomas Chase, Steve Rucker. *Art Director:* Michael Novotny. *Associate Producer:* Don Stern. *Special Designs by:* Robert Skotak, The L.A. Effects Group, Inc. *Special Visual Effects Created by:* Larry Benson, Suzanne Benson, Alan Markowitz, Dennis and Robert Skotak, the L.A. Effects Group, Inc. *Written by:* William Malone, Alan Reed. *Directed by:* William Malone. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a previous commercial spaceship is destroyed on the return trip from Titan, another U.S.A.-based corporation vessel the *Shenandoah*, is assigned to investigate the discovery of an ancient archaeology site on Saturn's moon.

The crew, led by Mike Davison (Ivar) and business executive Perkins (Ward), realize they are racing against time and a rival corporation, West Germany's Richter Dynamics, and so Perkins orders the ship landed hastily on Titan and it is badly damaged when it crashes through unstable ground. The crew is forced to seek help from the Richter Dynamics ship—which landed in a crater—but finds the ship abandoned save for bloody corpses ... and a drooling alien monster.

Then, a mysterious survivor of the Richter Dynamics expedition, Hofner (Kinski), shows up and warns the crew that the archaeology site is actually a laboratory of sorts, a collection of diverse life forms retrieved from all across the galaxy. One of the aliens managed to escape captivity and kill all twenty-one of his shipmates. Now the alien can re-animate dead crew members with a strange parasite, a biological control device. With air running out on the *Shenandoah*, Davison orders the crew to evacuate to the German ship, even though it means confronting and killing the monster. Soon, the crew is dying in various confrontations. Davison dispatches a security agent named Bryce (Salinger) to follow Hofner to the lab site in hopes of finding a way to destroy their monstrous enemy.

COMMENTARY: Someone with a high degree of familiarity with horror and science fiction film history created the enjoyable monster-on-the-loose movie, *Creature*. On first blush it's merely another low-budget rip-off of *Alien*, with yet another diverse crew facing one more monstrous alien boasting an unusual life cycle and similar permutations (a slug-like biological control device that can control the human mind and reanimate corpses). But there's actually more to *Creature*. The tapestry of this cheap film is woven, ironically, with canny references to cinematic and TV glories past, so that the movie emerges as a knowledgeable homage to *Alien*, *The Thing* and other classics.

Impressively, this film's Ripley equivalent is a heroine named Beth Sladen, played by Wendy Schaal. As many dedicated Whovians may recall, Elisabeth Sladen is also the name of the actress who portrayed the Time Lord's Companion, Sarah Jane Smith, during much of the Tom Baker era on the BBC science fiction series, *Doctor Who*. Sarah accompanied the Doctor through some of his most harrowing *Alien*-like space adventures, including the serials “*Ark in Space*” and “*Planet*

of Evil,” so to name a lead in *Creature* “Beth Sladen” is an entirely appropriate homage.

Creature quotes from the immortal *Forbidden Planet*, a movie also underlying *Galaxy of Terror*. In that film, Dr. Morbius noted to Leslie Nielsen’s space captain that all a good commander really needs to remain in charge of his crew is a “good, strong voice,” and that insult is echoed word for word here. The *Forbidden Planet* reference also feels appropriate, because in *Creature* the alien monster from the “zoo” can create phantasms in the human mind, much as Krell technology in the 1950s film could generate manifestations of the human Id. (William Malone, creator of *Creature* is the world’s #1 *Forbidden Planet* fan, and the owner of that 1956 film’s Robby the Robot prop.)

Finally, *Creature*’s denouement actually rests on one character’s knowledge of film history. “I saw a movie once,” Sladen says, recalling Howard Hawks’ *The Thing*, proceeding to describe that movie’s climax. In remembering the conclusion of that 1950s space horror, the crew in *Creature* realizes they must electrocute this monster too, as James Arness’s Thing was electrocuted.

Such homage reveals *Creature*’s love of film and TV history, and adds an extra layer of enjoyment to the proceedings if one happens to be a genre buff. By referencing older films like *The Thing* and *Forbidden Planet*, it’s also much harder to write the film off as nothing but an *Alien* rip-off. It’s actually derivative of much older antecedents, so in a weird way, *Creature* has inoculated itself from criticism.

If one is an admirer of “monster-on-the-loose” movies, *Creature* is enjoyable on its own terms too. It presciently predicts, for instance, that mankind’s future in space will consist of “a fierce race for commercial supremacy,” making the final frontier a battlefield for corporations, not nations.

“We are now in what your corporate manual would call a life threatening situation,” Captain Davison quips, making succinct the connection between business and space travel, and the hunt for the *real* final frontier: unfettered profits and an improved bottom line. Alas, once the bottom line (and avarice) is all that matters in an enterprise (forgive the pun), people become expendable, don’t they?

But delightfully, the movie doesn’t define its primary corporate character, David Perkins (Lyman Ward), in stark, two-dimensional terms. He starts out being a company guy through and through, but ends up a courageous hero. That’s a twist on the “space yuppie”

archetype, like Paul Reiser's character in *Aliens*.

Finally, *Creature* remains faithful to the low-budget demographic who would desire to see a movie with this title. Specifically, genre fave Klaus Kinski goes bonkers in a wacky supporting role, and one of the crew death scenes—inevitably—involves a strip tease and a sex scene. The character Susan undresses on the planet's surface, and then rips off John's helmet and exposes him to the toxic atmosphere. Even though he's dying, she mounts and kisses him. Nice.

In the 1980s, *Alien* rip-offs represented a common subgenre, and in the hierarchy of such movies, *Creature* is a more enjoyable viewing experience than most (and I'm looking at you, *Biohazard*!). The miniatures, sets, costumes and other production values are solid and the acting is just fine (and true to the heritage of films like *The Thing*), and the idea of a creature awakening out of an ancient extraterrestrial laboratory test-tube is efficacious in differentiating the film from the rest of the xenophobic pack.

Creepers

(a.k.a. *Phenomena*)

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Argento delivers yet another stylish and engaging film, though it lacks genuine scares. There are a few 'jump scares,' but on the whole, a bunch of insects buzzing against the window doesn't tingle my spine."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Connelly (Jennifer); Donald Pleasence (Professor John McGregor); Patrick Bauchau (Inspector Geiger); Daria Nicolodi (Frau Bruckner); Fiore Argento (Vera); Federica Mastroianni (Sophie); Mario Donatone (Morris Shapiro), Fausta Avelli, Marta Biuso, Sophie Bourchier, Paola Gropper, Ninke Hielkema, Mitzi Orsini, Geraldine Thomas (School Girls); Francesca Ottaviani, Michelle Soav.

CREW: *Presented by:* DAC Films. *Music:* Bill Wyman, Iron Maiden, Motorhead Simon Boswell, Andy Sex Gang, The Goblin, Claudio Simonetti, Fabio Pignatelli. *Written by:* Dario Argento, Franco Ferrini. *Photographed by:* Romano Albani. *Production Designers:* Maurizio Garrone, Nello Giorgetti, Luciano Spadoni, Umberto Turco. *Costume*

Designer: Giorgio Armani. Film Editor: Franco Fraticelli. Production Executive: Angelo Jacono. Makeup Special Effects: Sergio Stivaletti. Special Optical Effects: Luigi Cozzi. The chimpanzee Tanga owned and trained by: Daniel Berquiny. Directed by: Dario Argento. MPAA Rating: Unrated. Running time for Creepers: 82 minutes. Running time for Phenomena: 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jennifer (Connelly), the daughter of a famous American actor, enrolls in the Richard Wagner School for Girls in a town in Switzerland dubbed “The Swiss Transylvania.” Her new roommate, Sophie (Mastroianni), tells her that a maniacal killer is on the loose nearby and believed responsible for the death of several missing girls.

Jennifer is a bit of an odd bird: a girl who loves “all insects” and is also bedeviled by the curse of sleepwalking. By night the latter brings her to the home of a famous entomologist, the wheelchair-bound Scotsman Professor McGregor (Pleasence), and his loyal pet chimpanzee. McGregor is working with police inspector Geiger (Bauchau) on the case of the missing girls, and begins to teach Jennifer more about insects.

When Sophie is murdered, a firefly leads a sleepwalking Jennifer to evidence of the crime—a cast-off glove—and this event causes McGregor to believe that Jennifer shares a telepathic link with insects. A great sarcophagus fly leads Jennifer to the killer’s house, relying on its sense of smell (it senses corpses).

When Dr. McGregor is murdered, Jennifer’s father’s agent Morris Shapiro (Donatone) comes to fetch her, but it may be too late. The killer is somebody she already knows, somebody who is hiding a terrible and murderous secret in the basement.

COMMENTARY: A fifteen-year-old Jennifer Connelly is a friend to the insect world in *Creepers* (or *Phenomena*), a Dario Argento film that blends the paranormal world of *Suspiria* with the Italian *giallo* tradition.

The imagery displayed in *Creepers* is nothing short of amazing, even if the narrative is muddled. Only an artist with Argento’s muscular visual chops could climax his movie with the final girl being rescued by a straight-razor wielding simian.

And that’s just the last scene!

This unusual (and strangely stirring) movie also posits ESP between Jennifer and bugs. “It was like it heard me, and answered my call,”

she notes of one communications breakthrough. Jennifer also sleepwalks a lot, and that seems appropriate since Argento's hypnotic camerawork suggests a world out of order. A knitting needle falls from a sleeping nurse's lap and lands silently—straight down—in a ball of yarn. This is either a one-in-a-million shot, or evidence that the supernatural is in play.

With some sequences dominated by heavy metal music, *Creepers* also revels in a nasty discovery: a room with a squalid waste pool, filled with maggots and corpses. The film's villain is nearby, a strange child monster-thing which jumps onto a boat with Jenny and is about to do her grave bodily harm in until she pulls a Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, and calls the bugs to her defense. The insects cover the little mutant kid and he falls into the water ... waiting for one last shock (and a sting in a tail/tale).

Actually, there are two more stings. A shocking decapitation follows, and then it's time for the monkey with the razor to make his bow.

Day of the Dead

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Romero’s most sophisticated and effective fright tale yet. Like everything else the independent filmmaker has done, *Day* cooks on at least three levels—as grim chiller, rude black comedy and an almost-poignant comment on our desensitization.”—Glen Lovell, “*Dead Sets New Standards for Gore*,” *San Jose Mercury News*, October 7, 1986, page 11B.

“Romero has a lot of fun depicting every conceivable variation of dismemberment ... Romero’s film not only underscores how terrible death can be, but also forces us to confront the notion that, if by any chance there is an afterlife, it might not be one that any of us would welcome.”—Harry McGeduld, *The Humanist*, November/December 1985, pages 41–42.

“*Day of the Dead* has its moments of narrative depth ... [It is] the best performed and best written of the three [Dead] films, and is clearly the work of a serious filmmaker...”—Bill Cosford, “The Dead Return,” *The Miami Herald*, November 5, 1985, page 4B.

“*Day of the Dead*—in spite of fairly skilled delivery and effective

makeup artistry—came across [as] flat, a snoozer for the most part. Not even disgustingly graphic scenes of spilling guts, dismemberments, decapitations and barf, could keep the film lively. And spare us that little bit of sermonizing in the middle—a speech about how man shouldn't be messing with God's creations.”—Peter Stack, “A Slow Death for Romero's Zombie Flick,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 5, 1985, page 37.

“In his defense, Romero's budget was slashed just prior to production commencing on this film, and he needed to rewrite his script. This is the least admired of the four *Dead* movies, but there is a lot of good we can say about it. John Harrison's score is either loved or hated (work's fine by me), and it's a talky movie, there's no getting around that. But the character of Bub is inspired, and Howard Sherman's portrayal of him is equally inspired. The scene wherein Bub experiences Beethoven's ‘Ode to Joy’ on a Sony Walkman is priceless. Richard Liberty's insane Dr. Logan is equally wonderful. Tom Savini pulls out all the stops for some of his finest gore effects. *Day of the Dead* lacks the fun of *Dawn of the Dead* and very little of it was scary. But it was still a Romero *Dead* film. What hurt the film more than anything else was the nearly simultaneous release of Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead*, which was just way better than it had any right to be.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

“I remember watching this for the first time on the night of a big ice storm, shortly before the power went out. I fell asleep in front of the fireplace, listening to a battery-operated radio, and dreamed about a half-world overrun by zombies. Years later, the film still has a dream-like effect on me. The story is ruthlessly bleak, but unlike many American horror films of the 1980s, it does not play its cynicism for laughs. As with *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*, it is not about the literal zombies, but about the figurative zombies—characters that refuse to change, though the world has changed around them. In this regard, the villains are flat and tiresome, but the three main characters bring to life the real human horror of a zombie holocaust. *Day* is, at times, more compelling than its predecessors.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

“As much as I love zombie movies, this one isn't all that appealing. Military survivalist groups don't interest me much. While the gore is generous, there's not as much pure dread in this one as in Romero's first two zombie classics.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lori Cardille (Sarah); Terry Alexander (John); Joe Pilato (Rhodes); Jarlath Conroy (McDermott); Antone DeLeo (Miguel); G. Howard Klar (Steel); Ralph Marrero (Rickles); John Amplas (Fisher); Phillip G. Kellams (Miller); Tason Stavrakis (Turner); Gregory Nicotero (Johnston); Richard Liberty (Dr. Logan); Howard Sherman (Bub).

CREW: United Film Distribution Company Presents a Laurel Production. *Production Manager:* Zilla Clinton. *Art Director:* Bruce Miller. *Costume Designer:* Barbara Anderson. *Casting:* Christine Forrest Romero. *Film Editor:* Pasquale Buba. *Production Designer:* Cletus Anderson. *Music composed and performed by:* John Harrison. *Special Makeup Effects:* Tom Savini. *Director of Photography:* Michael Gornick. *Associate Producer:* Ed Lammi. *Co-Producer:* David Ball. *Executive Producer:* Salah M. Hassanein. *Produced by:* Richard P. Rubinstein. *Written and Directed by:* George A. Romero. *MPAA Rating:* No rating. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

INCANTATION: “They are us. The same animal, only functioning less perfectly.”—Dr. “Frankenstein” Logan (Richard Liberty) describes the living dead in the third movement of George A. Romero’s zombie series, *Day of the Dead*.

SYNOPSIS: The living dead walk! They have overrun America’s city’s in the late twentieth century, and now the flesh-eating ghouls outnumber man by 400,000 to one. Sarah (Cardille), a research scientist, leads an expedition to look for survivors in Miami, but finds a city of zombies. She returns with her lover, Miguel (DiLeo), a helicopter pilot named John (Alexander) and an electronics expert, McDermott (Conroy), to an underground bunker in the country, run by the military. There, things are getting ugly.

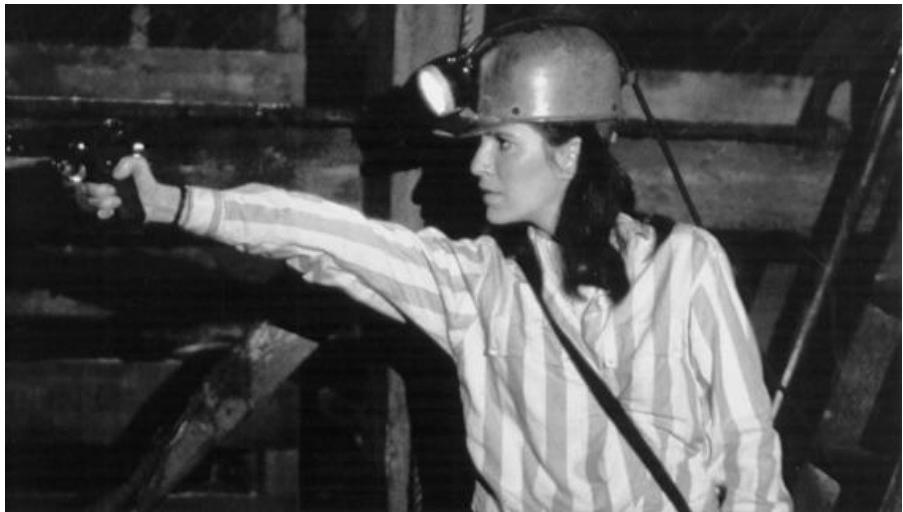
The soldiers, led by the tyrannical Rhodes (Pilato), are tired of facilitating the scientists’ research into the zombie phenomenon, and have had it up to their necks with Dr. Logan (Liberty), nicknamed “Dr. Frankenstein,” who believes that zombies can be domesticated. In fact, Logan has showed kindness to a zombie named Bub (Sherman), who has responded with intelligence.

Matters go from bad to worse when Rhodes murders Logan in cold blood. Miguel, who has been injured in an accident rounding up zombie specimen, lets the living dead into the subterranean cavern, and all hell breaks loose. While Sarah, John and McDermott desperately seek escape through a long-forgotten silo, Bub leads the

attack of the dead, eager to avenge Dr. Logan's death. In this venture, Bub has even learned how to use a gun, and tracks down Rhodes.

COMMENTARY: The end of the world is nigh, and “all the shopping malls are closed” in *Day of the Dead*, George Romero’s follow-up to the classic *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

For a long time, this movie represented the final installment of the “Dead” trilogy, at least until twenty years later, when Romero directed *Land of the Dead* (2005). But viewed either as the end of the *Dead* cycle or even just its twilight, *Day of the Dead* is not the film its predecessors were. It is neither the blistering comment on racial relationships that *Night of the Living Dead* turned out to be, nor the social critique of the consumer culture that *Dawn of the Dead* was championed as.



She can take care of herself. Sarah (Lori Cardille) takes aim at the undead in George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985).

Pity Romero. He had to sit idly by in the mid-1980s while Dan O'Bannon comically re-imagined the living dead in *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) and as Stuart Gordon brought the dead energetically back to life in the gonzo, *Re-Animator* (1985). Meanwhile, nobody would finance his dream script for a *Dead* sequel, even though *Dawn of the Dead* had been a blockbuster. Instead, he had to scale down, go cheap, and make a smaller-budgeted, less epic film. Set in a basement, to

boot.

Even with those limitations, Romero crafted a film of some very strong moments and images. The film starts out powerfully with a helicopter visit to Miami. A band of survivors from a nearby base land in this “dead” city, a metropolis left in tatters. This is the first time in the *Dead* movies that a sense of scope has really been proffered, and in a sequence that perfectly captures the apocalypse mentality of the 1980s, the dead city comes to life ... with zombies. Lots of ‘em.

These ghouls are more elaborately depicted than they were in previous efforts. There’s one missing a jaw, another who’s a beach bum, even a drum majorette. They don’t just look dead, but actually like they’re decaying. Romero cuts to an impressive high angle shot to capture the full breadth of the disaster as the dead progressively crowd the streets. This stunning opening promises adventure, wide open spaces, armies of the dead and more.

But then it’s back to the basement.

Day of the Dead settles down to tell the story of a strong, resourceful heroine, Lori Cardille’s Sarah. She’s a scientist trying to keep order and civilization in an underground military installation. Unfortunately, on one side she has tyrannical redneck military men to deal with, and on the other is a crazy scientist, Dr. Logan, who believes that he can condition the zombies to behave, and has taken one such creature under his wing, Bub.

What the plot actually entails, however, is lots of grandstanding and scene after scene of people talking and yelling at one another. This is more dire even than it sounds because the actors are not very good. The military men are portrayed as swaggering babbas. They’re racist, sexist, ignorant and murderous, and much less “real” or three-dimensional–seeming than the characters in either previous film. Logan is depicted flat out as a loony, and again, the performance is stagy, theatrical and unconvincing.

Stunningly, the pacing and even the writing is off too. After the great opener in Miami, the film returns for an over-long, talky scene that repeats information, is heavy in exposition and drones endlessly. This sequence alone, introducing the new leader, Rhodes, nearly sinks the movie. As if sensing that there’s really nowhere to go with this material (or in the basement, really), Romero depends heavily on nightmares to carry the horror in the early part of the film.

Even philosophically, *Day of the Dead* disappoints. There's no overarching metaphor here, and Romero fans have come to anticipate this facet of the saga. These films are supposed to be more than a zombie stomp, but inform us about some element pertinent to our times. *Night of the Living Dead* has been read as symbolic of America's dead in Vietnam resurfacing. *Dawn of the Dead* stresses the mall setting as mankind's temple, a place the zombies remember. *Land of the Dead* is about the post-9/11 world and "ignoring the problem" and living in decadence while outside, the rest of the world suffers. *Day of the Dead* is about ... what?

The best the film can offer is when Sarah's "outsider friends," John and McDermott, share a deep discussion about their predicament. John, the man with a thick, nearly-impenetrable Jamaican accent, suggests "It's ain't mankind's job" to figure out the zombies and that "We're being punished by the Creator. He's visiting a curse on us."



What's for dinner? The zombies draw blood (and guts, and eyeballs) in a gruesome scene from *Day of the Dead*.

No, that's it. Really. That mumbo jumbo is the crux of the narrative. The film ends with Sarah, John and McDermott flying off to what

appears to be a tropical island, ignoring the problem—the very thing Romero would rail against in the next picture.

Day of the Dead's plot also hinges on some unclear precepts. For instance, the character of Miguel is under a lot of stress. He's a soldier and he's not coping well with the coming of the apocalypse. After he loses an arm and is in recovery for a time, he takes the elevator to the surface and lets all the zombies into the installation. If this is a suicide attempt, why take out everybody else? If this is a shot at Rhodes' military dictatorship, doesn't he realize he's trapping Sarah and the others too, because the film has clearly indicated the only other way out of the basement is through the mountainside, the pen where the zombies are kept? If he isn't thinking of trying to save Sarah and isn't merely trying to commit suicide, then what is he up to? What is the motivation for his actions in letting in the zombie masses? Miguel's act appears to happen because the zombies need to be let in at this point in the story, and that's it.

In some ways, *Day of the Dead* is really Romero's ugliest picture. The special effects "feeding sequences" are more disgusting and leering than in the previous films (and way over-the-top in spots), the location (again—a basement) isn't very visually appealing, and the characters are rednecks, lunatics or ciphers. Because there's so little suspense and so few people to root for, Romero is forced to adopt the dynamic of the worst *Friday the 13th* movies for his finale. The film plays with that unpleasant equation where the audience cheers when characters are eaten and killed, rather than feeling sorry for them. Men like Rhodes, Rickles and Steel are racists and murderers after all, so I guess they have it coming. But this remains an inferior paradigm.

The film's bright spots—though few and far between—are certainly enough to earn *Day of the Dead* a positive review, and Romero the benefit of the doubt. The film makes an interesting point about the human need to keep records, for instance, to make some sense and order out of our time on Earth, a fact made plain at the conclusion when it is revealed that Sarah has brought a "new" calendar with her on the island.

Also, Bub is unequivocally a brilliant character, and if *Day of the Dead* is a valuable addition to the *Living Dead* saga for any reason, it is because Bub's scene moves the overall story ahead. Within Bub are the first useful stirrings of intelligence. Dr. Logan shows him kindness, and Bub reciprocates. Dr. Logan domesticates Bub and there's the sense that Bub loves him as a pet loves a master. The scenes outlining this relationship and Bub's journey into semi-sentience are good because

they concern the mystery of what the living dead really are. They are us and not quite us. Do they have memory? Can they learn? Is social and civil behavior beyond their capacity, or something that can be developed over time?

The answer becomes plain when, in the finale, Bub remembers how to use a gun and hunts Rhodes down. This truly is the “day of the dead,” because the zombie civilization is now on the ascent. The zombies are beginning to use tools, to self-organize, and this is truly the changing of dominant cultures that Romero once envisioned.

In the era of the final girl, it's also significant that Romero makes Sarah his lead. She's a very strong woman saddled with a very weak man (Miguel), and one senses that's the source of tension in their relationship. Sarah is smart, dedicated, physically capable and resourceful, just about the only character in the film who is likable, three-dimensional and not some hoary cliché. Besides Bub, that is. Sarah's best scene comes when she leaps into action following a zombie attack on Miguel. He's been bit, and without hesitating, she takes a machete and lops off his infected arm, preventing the spread of the zombie contagion. She then cauterizes the wound with a torch. This scene is not only graphic, it establishes Sarah's credibility with a minimum of effort. She's a worthy heir to *Night of the Living Dead*'s Ben.

Romero is a brilliant filmmaker, but one senses that *Day of the Dead* just isn't the movie he wanted to make. Instead, it was the movie that could be made in that time, with those resources. Accordingly, it's not really in the same league as the other three *Dead* pictures. But ... long live Bub!

LEGACY: Twenty years after *Day of the Dead* (1985), Romero directed *Land of The Dead* (2005).

Dead of Winter

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mary Steenburgen (Kate McGovern); Roddy McDowall (Mr. Murray); Jan Rubes (Dr. Josef Lewis); William Russ (Rob Sweeney); Ken Pogue (Officer Mullavye); Wayne Robson (Officer Huntley); Mark Malone (Roland McGovern); Michael Copeman (Highway Patrolman); Sam Malkin (Gas Joack); Pamela Moller (Woman on Audition);

Dwayne McLean (Killer); Paul Welsh (New Year's Eve Reveler).

CREW: A John Bloomgarden Production of an Arthur Penn film. *Casting:* Maria Armstrong, Ross Clydesdale. *Associate Producer:* Michael McDonald. *Music:* Richard Einhorn. *Production Designer:* Bill Brodie. *Costume Designer:* Arthur Rowsell. *Director of Photography:* Jan Weincke. *Produced by:* John Bloomgarden, March Schmuger. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dwayne McLean. *Written by:* Marc Schmuger, Mark Malone. *Directed by:* Arthur Penn. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A down-on-her-luck New York actress named Kate (Steenburgen) auditions for a feature already in production and is told she will be given the leading role if she travels upstate for the weekend to be made over and shoot an audition tape for the director, who is working in Canada.

When Kate arrives at the estate of Dr. Lewis (Rubes), a producer, she meets the wheelchair-bound man and his unusual and obsequious assistant, Mr. Murray (McDowall). Almost immediately, she senses something is amiss, as she is made up to resemble an actress already cast, but one who has reportedly suffered a nervous breakdown. Worse, she is asked to recite specific lines about a blackmail plot.

When Kate finds the ashes of her driver's license in the fireplace, she realizes that her hosts have no intention of letting her go, and in fact, plan to kill her as soon as her task is complete. As a storm rages outside the house, Kate's captors chop off one of her fingers to send as "evidence" in their scheme.

Kate finds a phone in the attic and calls her boyfriend. But he has no idea where she is, or how to get to her, and she isn't of much help. Time is running out, and Kate's life now depends on how good an actress she can be, especially when she discovers that an exact double exists...

COMMENTARY: Perhaps in response to efforts such as *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Road Games* (1982) and *Psycho II* (1983), the 1980s witnessed a revival of the classic, Hitchcock-inspired thriller. The Hitchcockian elements (as described here in the *Road Games* commentary)—including mistaken identity, blackmail, gallows humor and expressionist *mise-en-scene*—all resurfaced in Reagan's decade, to varying effect. One such film is Arthur Penn's icy *Dead of Winter*, an effort that depends on isolated locations and a wacky triple doppelganger premise to garner suspense.

Mary Steenburgen plays three roles in this film, and does a splendid job of differentiating each character. She's particularly good at playing the film's heroine, an out-of-work actress. Kate has been taken to an isolated house (and there's a storm outside) and has met some very strange people, but when she gets down to business—an audition—she takes control.

In this clever, well-directed scene, Steenburgen begins asking questions, making sure everybody is positioned where they should be, that her head is angled precisely. She talks about including a beat after a certain line, and though she doesn't realize it yet, Kate has found the key to surviving this house of horrors. She must *be* the actress she hopes to be; and must play each role so perfectly that she can fool even those closest to her.

This is a fun conceit, and it's interesting to watch Steenburgen's progression in the role. She goes from being hopeful and naive to worried and suspicious, to anger and victimized to—finally—taking control of the “scene” around her and shaping her “narrative.” She also realizes she has to be a “method” actor since one of her roles demands the amputation of a finger.

In a gruesome scene, Steenburgen awakens from a drugged slumber to find the finger chopped off. Blood trails on the bed sheets presages her discovery, and the movie wrings maximum horror from the discovery.

Of course, *Dead of Winter* is built on a fragile house of cards. As are most thrillers, when you get down to it. The film asks the audience to believe not just in identical twins, but that a “casting call” could find a third person who looks precisely like the other two, with the skill to pull off the mannerisms and voice of a dead woman. After that, the movie hinges on such absurdities as a gas station that gives away free goldfish for every ten dollar purchase, and the convenient placement of an attic phone. This last bit is particularly ridiculous, since the attic looks abandoned, save for the perfectly operating phone attached to a support joist.

Yet for every implausibility, *Dead of Winter* also revels in its ingenuity and cleverness. There's a perfectly timed and executed sequence in which Kate descends a staircase at the precise instant Dr. Lewis lifts up a cushion that reveals Evelyn's stashed body. But instead of detecting it, he turns towards Kate and lowers the cushion and hides the body. Later, there's an equally clever and ghoulish moment when a character seems to be returning from the dead, but it's just momentum, not necromancy. Penn also squeezes suspense out of a

sequence with visiting police officers, as Dr. Lewis says all the right things at exactly the right moment to make it appear that Kate is his insane patient. The more she pleads, the more she talks, the more his version of reality sounds plausible.

Movies like *Dead of Winter* tend not be particularly meaningful; they're films that revel in technique, in sustaining shock and suspense, and on those terms, *Dead of Winter* succeeds. The split screen effects—in which Mary Steenburgen plays scenes with herself—are accomplished, and the tremendous number of twists and turns keep the movie hopping.

And Roddy McDowall is really creepy in this movie as the obsequious, mentally deficient manservant. The great actor plays his last scene with a knife pinning one hand to his perforated throat.

Demons



Critical Reception

“*Demons* is a by-the-book Italian gore-fest that merrily sinks its claws in, and for eighty-eight minutes, refuses to let the viewer go. Director Lamberto Bava in no way possesses the talents of his father, Mario Bava, but is certainly capable of delivering high-octane entertainment as only the Italians can. Inane in almost every way, but a real rip-snorter just the same.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Urbano Barberini (George); Natasha Hovey (Cheryl); Karl Zinny (Ken); Fiore Argento (Hannah); Paola Cozzo (Kathy); Fabiola Toledo (Carmen); Nicoletta Elmi (Ingrid); Stelio Candellis (Frank); Nicole Tessier (Ruth); Geretta Giancarlo (Rosemary); Bobby Rhodes (Tony); Guido Baldi (Tommy); Bettina Ciampolini (Nina); Giuseppe Cruciano (Hot Dog); Sally Day (Carla); Jasmine Maimone (Nancy).

CREW: Dario Argento presents a Lamberto Bava film. *Original Story by:* Dardano Sacchetti. *Screenplay by:* Dario Argento, Lamberto Bava, Dardano Sarchetti, Franco Ferrini. *Music:* Claudio Simonetti. *Additional Music:* Rick Springfield, Motley Crue, Pretty Maids, Go West, The Adventures, Billy Idol, Accept and Saxon. *Director of Photography:*

Gianlorenzo Battaglia. *Processing Lab*: Luciano Vittori. *Production Designer*: David Bassan. *Costumes*: Marina Malavasi, Patrizia Massaia. *Film Editor*: Piero Bozza. *Supervising Film Editor*: Franco Fraticelli. *Production Manager*: Eros La Franconi. *Special Makeup Creations*: Sergio Stivaletti. *Makeup Artist and special makeup effects*: Rosario Prestopino. *Produced by*: Dario Argento. *Directed by*: Lamberto Bava. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 88 minutes.

INCANTATION: “They’ll make cemeteries their cathedrals and tombs your cities.”—The demon inscription on the tomb of Nostradamus in the life-imitates-art splatterfest, *Demons*.

SYNOPSIS: Two students, Cheryl (Hovey) and Kathy (Cozzo) play hooky from school and, at the invitation of a strange man in a metal face-mask, attend a movie sneak preview at the mysteriously renovated urban Metropol Theater. In the lobby before the screening, a black hooker cuts her face on a demon mask prop from the making of the film. The movie concerns a group of teens who find the mask at the tomb of Nostradamus and proceed to let loose a world-wide plague of demons and pestilence, events which are eerily mirrored in real life when the hooker turns into a demon. Before long, the theater is overrun with zombies. The girls are defended by two teen boys, George (Barberini) and Ken (Zinny). With no way out of the theater, the patrons blockade themselves in, but the demons begin to pick them off. Outside the Metropol, a gang of cocaine-addled thugs elude the police and break into the theater. Unfortunately, they leave the door open, and the demon plague spreads out into the city.

COMMENTARY: Self-reflexive horror movies such as *Demons* and *Anguish* (1988) were briefly in vogue during the mid-1980s, thanks in part to more mainstream efforts such as Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). In films of this type, action occurring on a movie screen—but inside a movie narrative—plays an important role. *He Knows You’re Alone* (1980) also played with this idea, staging a slasher-kill inside a movie theater playing a slasher movie. Directed gamely by Lamberto Bava, *Demons* is a hectic, fast-paced Italian-made horror that involves the strange events in a metropolitan theater exhibiting a horror movie. Before long, the demon infestation of the movie within a movie has also broken out in the theater playing it.

So life imitates art. Or thereabouts.

Two school-age girls play hooky to attend the Metropol Theater and see the scary movie, which in its separate and distinct narrative finds a group of teens searching for the graveyard of Nostradamus. The

prophet's tombstone reads "They'll make cemeteries their cathedrals and tombs your cities."

As it turns out, this movie-within-a-movie isn't just harmless fun. It's a genuine purveyor of evil, and a mask found in Nostradamus's grave spreads a pestilence and contamination not only to the characters inhabiting the fake movie, but to the characters *watching* the movie in the theater. The mask from the film—a prop—is on display in the Metropol lobby, and a hooker named Rosemary has scratched her face on it. She now carries the blood of demons.

Before long, the auditorium is overrun with teeth-gnashing monsters, and it's here that *Demons* achieves escape velocity. "It's the movie! The movie's to blame for all this!" one of the characters complains, and hearing those words, you can't help but wonder how many politicians have believed the same one-to-one reasoning. That movies inspire violence in real life.

As the demon plague threatens to stretch beyond the walls of the theater, *Demons* pauses to introduce more monster fodder, in this case a group of punks. In one of the film's most difficult-to-sit-through scenes, one punk scrapes cocaine off a girlfriend's exposed breast with a razor blade. He slips and cuts her...

Meanwhile, unnoticed, a demon slips out, and so apocalypse arrives sooner rather than later, as those who escape from the theater learn the hard way.

Filled with oozing and bloody special effects and violent deaths for all but a few, *Demons* makes the most of its complicated premise. In fact, all the movie-within-a-movie stuff even seems simple when one considers that Bava's effort is but another example of the rubber-reality trend stoked by Wes Craven's efforts. Here the alternate universe, one where monsters dwell, is not the dreamscape (as in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) or Hell itself (as in *Hellraiser*), not even TV Land (like Horace Pinker's escape route in *Shocker*) but rather the world of movies.

There's a nice speed and ferocity to the slobbering, evil-eyed villains in *Demons* and their demeanor makes them scary. Also, the film makes a point of noting that it's all too easy to become a demon: one scratch and humanity is sacrificed, and that adds some real discomfort to the close-quarter combat. *Demons'* climax is also a burst of crazy inspiration as one character, George, heroically hops on a motor bike and—armed with a sword—drives around the theater in circles.

Acting like Ash from the *Evil Dead* saga, George hacks and rides to victory, accompanied by pounding rock music.

As if this isn't ridiculous enough, a full-scale helicopter crashes into the compromised auditorium next (a symptom of the pandemonium occurring outside the theater) and the propeller blades get deployed as weapons.

Finally, *Demons* leaves a nasty surprise for the end credits, one which reveals the plague is both ongoing and a disease that doesn't play favorites. Even with final girls.

Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning

★ ½

Critical Reception

"Danny Steinmann ineffectually directed from a witless script..."—Lou Lumenick, "Friday: The Sequel That Wouldn't Die," *The Record*, March 25, 1985, page B07.

"Well, technically, it was a new beginning, since we actually have killer number three in the series. Unfortunately, killer number three is also very boring, even for a *Friday the 13th* film. For what it's worth, however, having a lame part V was an excellent way to set up for part VI, which was the most fun film in the series."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Melanie Kinnaman (Pam Roberts); John Shepherd (Tommy Jarvis); Shavar Ross (Reggie); Richard Young (Mat); Marco St. John (Sheriff Tucker); Juliette Cummins (Robin); Carol Locatell (Ethel); Vernon Washington (George); John Robert Dixon (Eddie); Jerry Pavlon (Jake); Caskey Swaim (Duke); Mark Venturini (Victor); Anthony Barrille (Vinnie); Dominick Brascia (Joey); Tiffany Helm (Violet); Richard Lineback (Deputy Dodd); Corey Feldman (Tommy Jarvis at Age 12); Suzanne Bateman (Nurse Yates); Todd Bryant (Neill); Miguel Nunez (Demon); Dick Wieand (Roy); Debisue Voorhees (Tina).

CREW: *Presented by:* Paramount Pictures. *Executive Producer:* Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Special Makeup Effects by:* Martin Becker. *Film Editor:*

Bruce Green. *Production Designer*: Robert Howland. *Director of Photography*: Stephen L. Posey. *Story*: Martin Kitrosser, David Cohen. *Screenplay*: Martin Kitrosser, David Cohen, Danny Steinmann. *Produced by*: Timothy Silver. *Directed by*: Danny Steinmann. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A grown-up Tommy Jarvis (Shepherd), haunted by memories of the psycho-killer Jason Voorhees he decapitated years earlier, has spent most of his adolescence in institutions. Now he is transferred to Pinehurst, a rural half-way house that helps mental patients return to society, but is soon embroiled in violence again.

After the murder of a Pinehurst boy named Joey (Brascia) by another inmate, a series of violent crimes are committed by a killer who has adopted the hockey mask guise of Jason. One by one, the mental patients and staff are murdered in horrible fashion, and Tommy can only conclude that Jason has returned from the grave. Tommy faces his terror once and for all in a barn, trying to rescue a young boy named Reggie (Ross) and a Pinehurst employee named Pam (Kinnaman). But he finds that Jason haunts him no matter what.

COMMENTARY: *A New Beginning* represents the nadir of the Jason films in the 1980s. It features even broader, more clichéd character types than those that appeared in the previous low point, 1982's *Part 3*, and since none of these people are likable, the audience is left with a movie that exists solely for the purpose of seeing unpleasant people killed. The resolution of the final mystery also fails to make sense, since the killer is not Jason, but rather a regular Joe out to avenge a death. If that's the case, where'd he get his stalker mojo?

In addition to its stable of young, unstable mental patients (who, in what may be a nod to *Don't Look in the Basement* [1973], are given access to axes), *A New Beginning* picks from another victim pool: unwashed locals who look like and sound like cast rejects from *Mother's Day* (1980). They're unwashed, filthy hooligans and totally ridiculous in conception and execution. We're back in the land of exaggerated, cartoony characterizations, as is also obvious from the depiction of a drooling fat kid who is seen eating a candy bar, with chocolate smeared all over his mouth. And because the gang worked so well in *Part 3* (not!), a new gang of greasers who escaped from the set of *The Outsiders* show up to get murdered. Although Tommy Jarvis is the star, his slice of the movie's narrative pie is considerably smaller than it should be and the film lingers for too long on these unpleasant characters.

A New Beginning represents the point in the *Friday the 13th* movies where many social critiques about the films are actually proven true. There is no sense of artistry in this film. The pace is leaden, the characters are stupid, and the film isn't scary in the slightest. This film exists solely for the purpose of allowing viewers to revel in the plight of Jason's victims. They're so unlikable that you don't empathize with them. Instead, you're invited to laugh as they're slaughtered, which is pretty despicable. Sure they're stupid and irritating, but do they really merit violent deaths? Personally, I'd reserve that fate for the film's scenarist and director of the film. Just kidding.

Slasher films by necessity must diverge from formula sometimes. The slasher paradigm has to be adjusted and tweaked with each outing so that things don't get stale, but the twist here is one that makes no sense. The killer isn't Jason but rather Roy, the paramedic. Turns out the fat kid who got killed at the rehab camp was his son. That's interesting in its own fashion, but the film falls apart because in addition to wearing Jason's disguise, Roy now apparently has all of Jason's instincts and superhuman strength. To wit, he is struck by a bulldozer—a bulldozer, mind you!—and he gets back up and keeps fighting. In the tradition of the Friday movies, he's always at the right place at the right time to go after the most vulnerable victim, but again, where did he pick up this ability? Of course, if Jason seemed less powerful than in previous entries, audiences would know immediately the big surprise, that he's an imposter. So *A New Beginning* cheats its way from start to finish with a surprise that doesn't make narrative sense.

Finally, screenwriter Martin Kitrosser is repeating his greatest hits here. He worked on *Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D*, another movie that featured a gang and a climax in a barn. And, establishing that the writer must have a shit fetish (and I don't mean because both of his scripts are shit), *Parts 3* and *V* also share murder scenes that occur in an outhouse.

A New Beginning is a substandard film in a franchise of wobbly quality; even the final chase is lacking in ingenuity. While watching events unfold, my mind began to wander about the franchise time line. In 1958, Jason died in a drowning accident. In 1979 Mrs. Voorhees got her head chopped off at Camp Crystal Lake. 1981's entry, *Part II* established that five years had passed since the Camp Blood massacre, meaning it was 1984 or 1985 by then. *Part 3* didn't establish a year, but let's assume it was 1984, and that both the 3-D entry and *Part IV* took place during the same couple of days (Jason maintains a hectic schedule).

Now, Tommy Jarvis has grown up and is at least sixteen or seventeen, which makes this film occur at least six or seven years later, so let's say it's 1990. So The *Friday the 13th* movies are now set in the future! This would become acknowledged fact in *Jason X*, which saw Jason on a spaceship in future centuries.

For those interested in a catalogue of Jason's (er, Roy's) weapons of mass destruction, there's more variety in this film than in the other *Friday the 13th* movies. He jabs a flare in one kid's mouth, in honor of Cropsy deploys hedge clippers to decapitate one girl, and then—in a disgusting sequence—utilizes a metal strap to bind a kid to a tree and slowly tightens it till he collapses his head. A chainsaw shows up sometime after the *de rigueur* lightning storm begins, and the movie ends with the imposter Jason impaled.

There, now you don't have to see the movie. Actually, since this movie is a blind alley and doesn't involve Jason, you can watch all the other *Friday the 13th* movies, skip this one, and not miss a thing.

Fright Night



Critical Reception

“*Fright Night* resurrects the blissful naiveté and dizzy plot implausibilities of the great wave of horror films of the 1950s and '60s ... It's daffy and sweet and sometimes unintentionally funny. It's even scary in its closing moments ... bloody and gruesome and quite harmless, just the way they made them ‘in the good old days.’”—Bill Cosford, “*Fright* Recalls Horrors of the Good Old Nights,” *The Miami Herald*, August 2, 1985, page 7C.

“[A] wild fun house of a movie that contains one of the more menacing members of the [vampire] breed and some ghoulily rewarding special effects. The vampire in *Fright Night* is played by Chris Sarandon, who gives a finely exaggerated performance, something on the order of Chris Sarandon doing Joan Crawford.”—Robert Denerstein, “*Fright Night*: A Horror Flick with Little Bite...,” *The Dallas Morning News*, August 12, 1985, page 1E.

“[H]ardly a classic horror flick, but it has several stunning moments and is infinitely more subtle and witty than *Friday the 13th*.”—Scott Caine, “*Fright Night* a ghoulish, witty delight,” *The Atlanta Journal/Atlanta Constitution*, August 5, 1985, page B/3.

“The often gushing special effects really seem special. Sarandon is a vampire in whose evil powers we can believe, even during the film’s light moments, when it barely skirts self-parody. There’s a lot of deft work on view here ... *Fright Night* is a clammy winner.”—Jay Carr, “*Fright Night* is Terrific,” *The Boston Globe*, August 2, 1985, page 21.

“Roddy McDowall makes this film something special, and there are lots of fun things in it for horror movie buffs, but it’s not as good a film as we’d like it to be. The vampire effects were good, and this film had all of the pieces that make for a fine film—there’s just something missing. Perhaps the tongue was too firmly in cheek. Just like other era films (*Poltergeist* comes to mind), when Hollywood gives us horror, it’s just not as good as horror that comes from outside.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Chris Sarandon (Jerry Dandridge); William Ragsdale (Charley Brewster); Amanda Bearse (Amy Peterson); Stephen Geoffreys (Evil Ed); Jonathan Stark (Billy Cole); Dorothy Fielding (Judy Brewster); Art J. Evans (Detective Lennox); Roddy McDowall (Peter Vincent); Stewart Stern (Cook); Nick Savage (Bouncer #1); Ernie Holmes (Bouncer #2); Heidi Sorenson (Hooker); Irina Irving (Teenage Girl); Robert Corff (Jonathan); Pamela Brown (Miss Nina); Chris Hendrie (Newscaster).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents a Vista Films Production of a Tom Holland film. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Casting:* Jackie Birch. *Associate Producer:* Jerry A. Baerwitz. *Film Editor:* Kend Beyda. *Production Designer:* John De Cuir, Jr. *Director of Photographer:* Jan Kiesser. *Producer:* Herb Jaffe. *Stunt Coordinator:* Bill Couch, Jr. *Visual Effects Produced by:* Richard Edlund. *Costume Designer:* Robert Fletcher. *Written and Directed by:* Tom Holland. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 106 minutes.

P.O.V.

“Tom [Holland] was nervous as hell, because he was a first time director, and he needed a lot of hand-holding, but he was a great guy, a lot of fun to work with, and clever and creative ... Luckily, Tom had a great sense of fun, so it was shot with that in mind. We were able to make it this amazing, scary and funny thing, just based on his whole attitude as a director. That helped put it over ... I think that movie has a real good sense of tone, from start to finish. It’s a little bit campy, but it’s quite scary and funny at the same time. It’s pretty brilliant, I must say.”—*Fright Night* editor Kent Beyda provides a little

background information on the film.

SYNOPSIS: Charley Brewster (Ragsdale), a lifelong horror movie fan who is having problems with his girlfriend Amy (Bearse), becomes convinced that his new next door neighbor Jerry Dandridge (Sarandon) is a vampire who is murdering prostitutes by night.

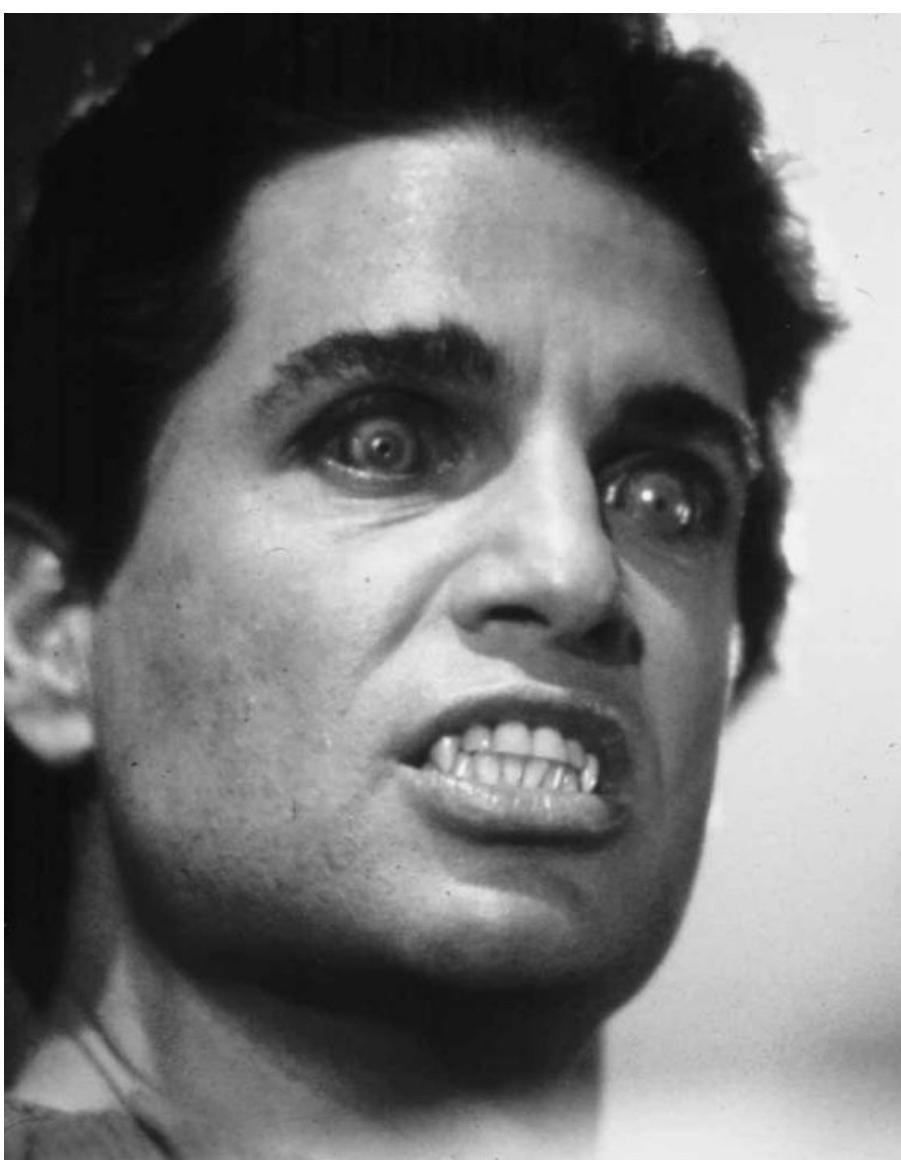
When Charley brings the police to investigate Dandridge and his live-in friend, Billy Cole (Stark), the vampire retaliates by going after Amy—who resembles Dandridge's long lost lover—and Evil Ed (Geoffreys), Brewster's best buddy.

Out of options, Charley enlists the aid of out-of-work B-movie actor and former *Fright Night* TV host, Peter Vincent (McDowall). The only problem is that unlike the fearless vampire killer he portrays on silver screen, Vincent is a coward.

COMMENTARY: In its nostalgic and romantic way, the highly entertaining *Fright Night* plays with the popular 1980s idea of “danger from a stranger.” Here, a mysterious new tenant moves into the home next door, and his neighbors worry because they know nothing about him or his history. He could be seeing prostitutes, he could be—*gasp*—gay, or, as in *Fright Night*, he could be an evil bloodsucker. In the 1980s, the bonds in communities like this one aren’t as strong as they once were, and suspicion reigns supreme.

The crux of *Fright Night*, however, is not just the unknown moved in next door, but the danger posed by an adolescent sexual awakening. Each young character in the film charts the same trajectory. They’re each growing up, moving into the adult world of sex, and finding that there are dangers. The vampire Jerry Dandridge is but the catalyst, a sexual being, who brings the issues to the surface.

Take Charley Brewster. As *Fright Night* opens, he pushes his girlfriend Amy for sex on the floor of his bedroom. Heavy petting gets a little too aggressive and he reaches a hand up her shirt. “Charley, stop it!” she orders. “We’ve been going out all year, and all I hear is ‘Charley, stop it,’” the frustrated boy responds.



The charming Jerry Dandridge (Chris Sarandon) reveals his true colors in *Fright Night*.

But the real problem with Charley is not frustration. Instead, it's clear that he's not really ready (or mature enough) for sex. He wants to have sex (it's like a hurdle to jump), but he's also easily distracted by what's on TV. He enjoys watching horror movies, and *watching* is part of his problem. He spends an inordinate amount of time spying on others through his binoculars, looking but not participating. Charley's problem is simply that he's not really ready to act and be a sexual adult. He still doesn't know who he is and therefore isn't a man. The film provides a test for Charley: He must be man enough to win Amy back from a competitor and rally other men (like Peter) to his cause. In the course of *Fright Night* he grows into a confident leader, a fighter, not just an observer (as he is at film's beginning). Charley only makes love to Amy after he has defeated Dandridge, a challenge to his manhood, the spur to make an adult.

Amy wants to be treated as a woman, not groped on the floor like a teenager. Charley is a klutz and an unromantic sort, but Jerry Dandridge is a smooth operator. Late in the film, he seduces Amy on the dance floor in one of the film's most stirring and erotic sequences. He awakens Amy sexually, and—freed to express herself—she vamps, literally. She opens her collar for Dandridge, exposing her neck. Then, she kneels before him, assuming the submissive position necessary to perform fellatio. Dandridge takes Amy home to bed and dresses her in a sexy nightgown. Amy clearly enjoys the attention from this baddest of bad boys and willingly surrenders herself to him. She undoes her dress and experiences an orgasm when he sinks his teeth into her, her moaning dominating the soundtrack as twin blood tracks roll down her bare back.

Once vampirized, Amy is a completely sexual being. Her hair has changed to a flaming orange, her breasts have grown by about three sizes, and she's a sultry adult, a mature-looking woman, no longer the teen. Dandridge has transformed Amy into a sexually aware adult, and as Amy remains a vampire, her sexuality comes to the fore in a scary way. Suddenly, her teeth resemble a devouring vagina. Adulthood has made her a sexual monster, and only Charley, now ready to “love” her at last, can rescue her from this fate.

The third young person is Evil Ed. His sexual awakening also comes at Dandridge's hand. In a dark, lonely alley, the vampire seduces the boy. “I know what it's like to be different,” he tells him, in a speech that indicates homosexuality's outsider status. “They won't pick on you any more. Or beat you up. I'll see to that,” Dandridge promises.

Again, director Holland stages this scene in a sexual fashion that can't be mistaken. As Ed is proffered Dandridge's hand, he's in the submissive position, his face down at crotch level. Dandridge's promise is to make Ed belong somewhere, not be the perpetual, despised outsider, and that promise is depicted within a sexual (in this case, homosexual) context.

Jerry Dandridge's relationship with Billy Cole, his live-in carpenter, is also played strictly as a homosexual one. After Charley has injured Jerry, Cole tends to Dandridge, kneeling before the powerful vampire's mid-section. He's not performing fellatio, but rather bandaging a wound, but the staging is again, provocative. An odd indicator of the homosexual nature of this relationship is also revealed in a throwaway shot of a "fruit bowl" in Dandridge's house. Look closely, and you'll notice the placement of a long banana placed over apples, a phallic symbol.

As for Dandridge, he's clearly a metrosexual in this film, a refined, urbane man with perfectly coiffed hair and the capacity to go "either way" in terms of his sexuality (and add vampirism as the third way). He dresses immaculately in cool gray and fiery red, a uniform-like combination that reveals both his coolness and his essential "hotness."



The bride of the vampire? Amy (Amanda Bearse) transforms into a seductive siren in *Fright Night*.

I recently had the opportunity to discuss *Fright Night's* sexual overtones with the film's editor, Kent Beyda.

"That was all very conscious. It was all planned out," Beyda confirms. "When the kid is looking through his window at Chris Sarandon, his assistant goes down on his knees in front of Chris. That was deliberate."

"I think that's part of who Tom [Holland] was. He wanted to explore that part it [of vampirism], in addition to everything else. The vampire myth is always very sexual and I think he wanted to go into every aspect of sexuality related to vampires. He definitely peppered the script with that kind of thing. Even the relationship between Roddy McDowall and William Ragsdale had some sort of overtones I think. It was just part of the whole *mise-en-scene*.

"To me that's what makes a great movie. It works on more than one level. That's what you want. These days they don't make those movies any more. They don't allow it. I worked on the first *Scooby Doo* movie and that was designed to be layered and it had lots of interesting subtext and the studio made us drop every bit of it. So, yeah, a movie like *Fright Night* couldn't be made these days, at least not by a major studio."

In addition to strong sexual elements, ones stressing that period of sexual awakening when a person chooses what he or she will become as an adult, *Fright Night* disarmingly plays with the horror genre. For instance, in a brief insert shot, Billy Cole's pinky finger juts out at a weird angle. Fans of the TV show *The Invaders* (1967–68) will recognize this odd digit placement as the only way, in that series, to discern alien from human. On a more general scale, *Fright Night* suggests that the horror movie arms kids well for life. A knowledge of vampires and the like can come in handy; you just never know when. The film's most famous line comes from Roddy McDowall playing Peter Vincent. "I have just been fired because nobody wants to see vampire killers any more," he laments. "Or vampires either. Apparently all they want are demented madman running around in ski masks hacking up young virgins."

Has a better epitaph for the 1980s horror cinema ever been delivered?

In the course of *Fright Night*, Peter goes from being impotent and cowardly to conquering his fears, and that's just one more fun element of the film, watching McDowall ham it up as a past-his-prime Hammer-type horror star. Happily, his character ends the film introducing (on *Fright Night Theater*) the film *Mars Wants Flesh*.

Provocative and daring, yet simultaneously nostalgic and wholly entertaining, *Fright Night* is one of the ten best horror films of the 1980s. It's wickedly funny, the performances (especially McDowall's and Sarandon's) are top-notch, and the special effects are impressive. The *dramatis personae* are hugely appealing and, most importantly, *Fright Night* successfully re-contextualizes the vampire myth to fit in 1980s America rather than the mountains of Transylvania.

Future Kill

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Edwin Neal (Splatter); Marilyn Burns (Dorothy Grim); Gabriel Folsom (Paul); Alice Villarreal (Julie); Wade Reese (Steve); Barton Faulks (Tom); Jeffrey Scott (George); Rob Rowley (Jay); Greg Kanne (Clint); Doug Davis (Eddie Pain); Karin Kay (Curious Bad Girl); Cathy Durkin (Julie's Friend); Joe Abner (Fire Breather); Max and the Make-ups (Mutant Band).

CREW: Magic Shadows Presents a Don Barker Production. *Film Editors:* Leon Seith, Charlie Simmons. *Costumes and Makeup:* Kathleen Hagan. *Director of Photography:* Jon Lewis. *Screenplay:* Ronald W. Moore. *Additional Material by:* Edwin Neal, John H. Best, Gregg Unterbeger. *Executive Producer:* Don Barker. *Associate Producers:* Ronald W. Moore, Edwin Neal, Terri Smith. *Special Effects Makeup:* Robert A. Burns. *Produced by:* John H. Best, Gregg Unterberger. *Directed by:* Ronald W. Moore. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I'm the leader of a non-violent movement, but you're a violent person."—Political leader Eddie Pain (Doug Davis) explains to his assistant, Splatter (Edwin Neal), why things just aren't going to work out between them.

SYNOPSIS: A group of fraternity brothers doing penance for "bad

acts” are recruited to go downtown to kidnap a member of the new sub-culture gang, the No-Nuke Mutants—a socially conscious, non-violent affiliation of punkers. They end up trying to kidnap Eddie Pain (Davis), the pacifist leader of the movement, but his violent major domo, a cyborg named Splatter (Neal), seizes the opportunity to murder Pain and pin the assassination on the frat brothers. So begins a night of terror, as the boys seek to escape the wrath of the No-Nuke Mutants. A kindly hooker, Julie (Villarreal), takes them to the enigmatic Dorothy Grim (Burns), a power-broker whose loyalties are uncertain. With Splatter chasing them down, the frat boys have no choice but to trust Dorothy, and they flee to her headquarters in an abandoned nuclear research lab. Splatter catches up with them and, with his elite squad of assassins, begins killing them off. During the final confrontation, some of the frat boys come to realize that through their association with Grim and Julie, their lives have changed forever and they cannot return to the fraternity.

COMMENTARY: A very fertile imagination came up with the premise for this low-budget oddity. This movie posits a near-future dystopia wherein two 1980s demographics, both social “outsiders” (anti-nuke activists and punk rockers), will join forces and become a new disenfranchised minority in the United States.

At first blush, this notion appears absurd (if wacky and inspired), especially considering the ideology of both factions. Punks are nihilistic body-piercers who envision no tomorrow; their music concerns death and a dearth of hope. By contrast, anti-nuke activists fight tooth-and-nail for a better tomorrow. They want to outlaw nuclear power and weapons because they deem them unsafe, and fear meltdowns, fall-out, and mutation. So punks see only themselves and their lives and the anti-nukers are concerned about others, the whole planet in fact. One group trades on pessimism, the other optimism.

Therefore, it’s a bit of a stretch to see how these two diverse groups would come together. Unless, again, they were herded into the rundown parts of a poor city by a Fascist, totalitarian government.

But that could never happen in America. Why, you’d have to imagine a populace in a constant state of unending war, so afraid of an “enemy” (people who look different) that they would let their freedoms lapse. That they would permit electronic surveillance by the government with no court orders. That so-called political “enemies” could be taken off the street and held in prisons without any charges ever being brought against them. That a unitary executive would assert his power above the rule of law.

Oh, wait a minute...



They'll Always have *Chain Saw*: Splatter (Edwin Neal) confronts Dorothy Grim (Marilyn Burns) in *Future Kill* (1985), a "future

horror” film that reunites these stars of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

Actually, as outrageous as it might seem, *Future Kill* just may be a powerfully prescient movie. At one point, for instance, a No-Nukes Mutant (part of a “peaceful culture”) says that his people live in poverty and squalor for “challenging the conservatives.” So this movie actually represents a clever extrapolation from the 1980s, the era of the “new patriotism,” when challenging a popular leader like Reagan would win the enmity of his party; when the poor became poorer and the rich became richer.

Wouldn’t happen, you say? Well, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a Republican representative, Richard Baker of Baton Rouge, told listeners, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” And in early 2006, Chris Matthews, the host of TV’s *Hardball*, marginalized anti-war protesters by comparing terrorist Osama Bin Laden with leftist filmmaker Michael Moore. That kind of exclusionary and, let’s face it, fascist “group think” isn’t terribly far from a mentality that might create a ghetto for those lefty adversaries of a powerful right-wing administration.

In other words, as *Future Kill* suggests, dissidents, punks and anti-nuke activists might be left no other choice but to forge a community based on what they have in common, rather than what separates them.

Considering this admittedly goofy premise, *Future Kill* is nothing less than a subversive, leftist horror fantasy, created by someone who had the foresight to imagine twenty years of GOP dominance on the American political landscape. In fact, the film is, in an exploitative fashion, a story about the political awakening of a generation. The protagonists (called “Zods” after Izod shirts) are stupid, narrow, indulged frat boys who suddenly land in a life-and-death situation and must deal with how “the other half” lives. They must contend with survival on the streets, a place where the cops don’t go, except the corrupt ones. These protagonists, sons of authority figures like police, actually “grow” in the film, getting to the point where their safe but vapid world looks meaningless and, worse, a lie. So *Future Kill* is an imaginative urban morality play with a political undercurrent that’s fascinating.

Which isn’t to say that *Future Kill* is a particularly good movie ... only one with a highly original concept. The film is known in horror circles

mostly for the reuniting of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* stars Marilyn Burns and Edwin Neal. But let's face it, this isn't exactly the re-teaming of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Like *Escape from New York* or *The Warriors*, this movie is primarily a futuristic urban chase fantasy, and one on a low budget, to boot. However, there's a pulse-pounding soundtrack, some decent night shooting, a surprise or two in terms of storyline, and enough of ultra-violence to satisfy hardcore horror aficionados. And if the sub-text is taken into account, the idea that this film was envisioning the War on Terror and the conservative dominance of the 21st century, this low-budget film even feels a bit daring.

Ghoulies



Critical Reception

“Rubber monsters can be fun if you’d had enough to drink beforehand, and that’s about the only way I’d recommend watching this film.”— William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Liapis (Jonathan Graves); Lisa Pelikan (Rebecca); Scott Thomson (Mike); Ralph Seymour (Mark/Toad Boy); Mariska Hargitay (Donna); Keith Joe Dick (Dick); David Dayan (Eddie); Victoria Catlin (Anastasia); Charene Cathleen (Robin); Tamara De Treaux (Gredictot); Peter Risch (Grizzel); Michael Des Barres (Malcolm Graves).

CREW: Empire Pictures presents a Charles Band production. *Costume Designer:* Kathie Clark. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Production Design:* Wayne Springfield. *Special Effects Makeup and Ghoulies Mechanical and Makeup Design by:* John Carl Buechler. *Original Music:* Richard Band, Shirley Walker. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Peter Manoogian. *Associate Producer:* Debra Dion. *Film Editor:* Ted Nicolau. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Jefery Levy. *Written by:* Luca Bercovici, Jefery Levy. *Directed by:* Luca Bercovici. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A baby is rescued from its destiny as a human sacrifice in a ritual conducted by its daddy, a Satanic priest named Malcolm Graves (Des Barres). That baby grows up to become Jonathan (Liapis), a college student who has inherited his father’s estate. The first thing

Jonathan does is throw a party with his girlfriend, Rebecca (Pelikan), for a group of wild and crazy buddies. As a party trick, Jonathan tries to conjure a spirit in the basement chapel where the Satanic coven used to meet, but only succeeds in raising monstrous ghoulies ... tiny, demonic creatures with an appetite for destruction. Jonathan drops out of school, to Rebecca's dismay, and throws another party to conduct another special ritual. It turns out that Malcolm Graves is back from the grave too, and has his own plans for his son, the ghoulies and his former estate.

COMMENTARY: It takes a whopping fifty-seven minutes to get to the first on-screen attack in director Luca Bercovici's underwhelming *Ghoulies*. When the fateful moment finally comes—the death of a character called Toad Boy—it's not particularly scary or well-done. Instead, the moment, just like so many other in this film, is only a testimony to how rubber can be manipulated to look exactly like, well, rubber.

Ghoulies is a movie devoted to special effects. Scratch that. It's a movie devoted to bad special effects. Even worse, the bad special effects aren't even well-integrated into the action. The director has mastered the not very challenging (but useful) art of the insert shot, cutting in rubbery puppetry every chance he gets into otherwise uninteresting scenes involving dialogue. A Ghoulie appears in the roast beef in one dinner scene. Later, there's one in the soup, etc.

Finally, there's a montage of the Ghoulies making mischief playing the piano, popping out of floor vents, and even wading in a toilet bowl! Most of the time, the main characters don't detect the Ghoulies in these sequences, so the director is saved the time and expense of lensing reaction shots. It's a perfect little low-budget set-up, really. Must have made for a quick shoot.

Such as it is, *Ghoulies*' story involves a college kid who, like all his friends, appears to be pushing thirty-five, and becomes a Satanic priest just like his evil dad. Things don't go as he plans, however, after using Satanic spells to get laid by his gorgeous girlfriend. To wit, Big Daddy wants to be restored to his former glory by stealing son Jonathan's youth.

When the final battle is fought, it consists of that clichéd 1980s ending (seen also in *The Keep* [1983] and *Big Trouble in Little China* [1986]): Good and evil lock horns and shoot colored laser beams at each other in a spectacular light show.

The film ends in slam-bam fashion with another popular cliché: a freeze frame of the evil Ghoulies in the backseat of a car, ready to wreak more terror. It's a perfectly crappy ending to a perfectly rubbery little movie. The most inventive (and humorous) aspect of *Ghoulies* is its brilliant (and true) ad-line: "They'll get you in the end!"

LEGACY: Goaded by its funny ad-line, and the irresistible sight of a rubber monster coming up out of a toilet, teens (like me!) saw *Ghoulies* by the bus-full, and the film became a hit. Three sequels followed: *Ghoulies II* (1987), *Ghoulies III: Ghoulies Go to College* (1991) and *Ghoulies IV* (1994).

The Hills Have Eyes Part II

★ ★

Critical Reception

"Don't know what Wes was thinking, here. Maybe he went to the well once too often. We've been down this path before. Nothing new."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Berryman (Pluto); Kevin Blair (Roy); John Blom (The Reaper); Janus Blythe (Rachel/Ruby); Peter Frechette (Harry); Robert Houston (Bobby); Penny Johnson (Sue); John Laughlin (Hulk); Willard Pugh (Foster); Coleen Riley (Jane); Tamara Stafford (Cass); David Nichols (Psychiatrist); Edith Fellows (Mrs. Wilson); Lance Gordon (Mars); Susan Lanier (Brenda); Brenda Marinoff (Katy); Martin Speer (Doug); Virginia Vincent (Ethel); James Whitworth (Jupiter); Arden Meyer (Man with Towel).

CREW: Adrienne Fancey in association with New Realm Entertainments and VTC present a film by Wes Craven. *Casting:* Steve Kolzak Casting. *Production Designer:* Dominick Bruno. *Director of Photography:* David Lewis. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Film Editor:* Richard Bracken. *Producers:* Barry Cahn, Peter Locke. *Written and Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* NR. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Bobby Carter (Houston) saw much of his suburban family massacred in the Nevada desert by a wild family of cannibals led by Papa Jupiter. Now, eight years later, he experiences post-traumatic stress as he is due to head out into the desert again to test a new

invention, a type of gas fuel for mountain bikes. Crippled by his fear, Bobby stays home. A group of intrepid youngsters head out into the desert anyway, taking an unfortunate detour on Furnace Canyon Road.

Almost immediately, the kids run afoul of the same wild family, which includes the madman Pluto (Berryman) and a hulking giant known as “The Reaper” (Blom). Only one among the teens realizes who these killers are, for she was one of them. Rachel (Blythe) was once the wild girl Ruby, rescued by the Carters years ago. Now the other teens, including the heroic Roy (Blair), will need all of her expertise and knowledge of the clan if they are to survive a horrific night in the desert.

COMMENTARY: *The Hills Have Eyes Part II* opens with definite promise. Noises and dialogue from the first film is played over the same desert-spanning pan which commenced the first *Hills Have Eyes* (1977). If one listens closely, Brenda’s shout “Don’t leave me!” is audible. Doug wonders “Why?” the evil Papa Jupiter—leader of the cannibal clan—promises to eat Big Bob’s heart and “stinkin’ memory.” This is a reminder of the riveting, vicious nature of that original film, a prime example of the savage cinema.

One of the few survivors of the original desert massacre, that “white bread” Carter boy, recounts the tale to his concerned therapist. Both performers are captured by Wes Craven’s camera in tight close-ups, and the audience feels an urgency and intensity to the scene. So far so good, but then the film shifts immediately to a series of extended flashbacks meant to serve as “memories.” Yes, just like *Boogeyman II* and *Silent Night, Deadly Night 2*, much of this sequel is going to feature rerun material. At one point, the surviving dog has a flashback, and that’s patently ridiculous. After this lengthy recap of the first film, the sequel never adequately finds its footing. All told, there are four flashbacks in the relatively short film (85 minutes), and each goes on for several minutes.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Robert Houston in the role of Bobby Carter only serves to muddle issues, since his character is of virtually no importance. He opens the film in the scene with the psychologist, and it is nice to see a familiar face, but then his therapist encourages Bobby to return to the desert and work out his fears. Theoretically, Carter should have to face his fear, return to the desert and conquer his anguish. That would be the appropriate character arc, right? Instead, Bobby does not accompany the other protagonists into the desert and so his plot strand is nothing but a dead end. After fifteen

minutes Bobby and Houston are gone, never to return. All throughout the film, one expects a last-minute rescue from him ... or at least an assertion of some kind that he has overcome his fear ... but nothing. He's just gone, and so one is left to wonder if he was being saved for a possible sequel, or if the production merely ran out of time and money and didn't adequately bring closure to his subplot.

In its central plot, *The Hills Have Eyes Part II* plays as a repetition of the first film, but one that lacks much of the style and verve that made the original such a visceral viewing experience. Typical of the 1980s, teenagers are at the heart of this film, and the youngsters are somewhat likable, but ultimately no more differentiated or developed than any of Jason's innumerable victims in the *Friday the 13th* film of your choice. One teenage is sarcastic, two are black, one is cocky, and another is blind. That's the level of characterization at work here.

The Hills Have Eyes Part II also adopts the slasher film paradigm hook, line and sinker. There are P.O.V. stalking shots, practical jokes played by teens pretending to be the "real" killer, and even a hackneyed sequence in which the survivor—typically a final girl—uncovers the den of the villain and goes on the tour of the dead, discovering the corpses of all her friends. The film also takes a page from *Wait Until Dark* in its depiction of blind Cass feeling her way through Reaper's cave. It's a scary moment, but ultimately not one that can save the film.

There are also some unbelievable plot developments in this sequel. The revelation that Reaper is Papa Jupe's big brother is hard to swallow. Grandpa Fred took time to reveal the entire story of Jupe and his family in *The Hills Have Eyes* and made no mention of Reaper, who according to this sequel was his first son. Fred had no reason to lie, so what are audiences to make of the sudden appearance of a heretofore unknown brother? Was Reaper transferred into the desert from Cleveland? Was he away on vacation during the first film?

Ultimately, *The Hills Have Eyes Part II* plays like a cheap slasher film, instead of rising to the level set by its gut-punching predecessor. This is one sequel that never should have been made.

LEGACY: A remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*, directed by Alexandre Aja, was released in early March of 2006. Produced by Wes Craven, the faithful film was considered a big hit. The battle between the haves and have nots was put in a different context, with the sins of America come back to haunt the middle class. A metaphor for the Iraq War. But where was brother Reaper?

The Housekeeper

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rita Tushingham (Eunice Parchman); Ross Petty (George); Tom Kneebone (Norman); Shelley Peterson (Jackie); Jessica Steen (Melinda); Jonathan Crombie (Bobby); Don Ewer (Mr. Parchman); Peter MacNeill (William); Jackie Burroughs (Joan); Joyce Gordon (Aunt); Aisha Tushingham (Young Eunice); Gary Krawford (Larry); Wanda Cannon (Bernice); Layne Coleman (Pastor); Betty Harris (Teacher).

CREW: *Presented by:* Rawi Film Inc., and Schulz Productions. *Associate Producers:* Anthony Kramreither, Robert MacLean. *Casting:* Diane Polley. *Line Producer:* Jim Cole. *Costume Designer:* Linda Matheson. *Art Director:* Reuben Freed. *Director of Photography:* David Herrington. *Film Editor:* Stan Cole. *Music:* Paul Zaza. *Executive Producers:* David Pady, Ousama Rawi, Harve Sherman. *From the novel "A Judgment in Stone"* by: Ruth Rendell. *Screenplay by:* Elaine Waisglass. *Produced by:* Harve Sherman. *Directed by:* Ousama Rawi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In England, a much put-upon dyslexic woman, Eunice Parchman (Tushingham), murders her abusive father (Ewer) and then heads to the States to work for the Coverdale family as a housekeeper. She takes up her duties there, but quickly wears out her welcome especially with half-siblings Bobby (Crombie) and Melinda (Steen), who are having intimate relations. Before long, Eunice has befriended an ex-prostitute, born-again “Messenger of God” named Joan (Burroughs), really a whacko, who learns how to press Eunice’s murderous buttons. After family patriarch George (Petty) fires Eunice over her incompetence and rude behavior, Joan and Eunice return with a shotgun on New Year’s Eve to teach the well-to-do Coverdale family a lesson.

COMMENTARY: *The Housekeeper* concerns a spree killer. Only in this case, the offending criminal is a seemingly retiring female, an English housekeeper named Eunice come to the United States to serve a wealthy American family as a domestic. Alternately compelling and distancing, *The Housekeeper* gains considerable traction from the presence of Rita Tushingham, who paints a compelling portrait of

madness and pain in the role of Eunice.

When the audience first meets Eunice, our future spree murderer, she's just a little girl at school, humiliated by her classmates because she can't read. Stressed, Eunice urinates in her pants during the class, making the teasing even worse. On the way home from school, her classmates torment her again, this time with a jar of spiders, the film showing how children can be cruel and relentless.

Immediately after scenes of Eunice's troubling childhood, the film dramatizes Eunice's life at home as a young lady, taking care of her sick, nasty father. Like Ray Milland in *The Attic* (1980), this Bad Father makes Eunice promise him she'll never marry, and essentially treats his daughter like a slave. He berates her over little things like the fact that his tea was prepared incorrectly; his only pleasure in life is verbally abusing Eunice. Consequently, no one in the audience sheds a tear when Eunice smothers him to death with a pillow.

When Eunice arrives in the United States to begin her stint as a housekeeper, she is immediately put on the defensive by the upper-class family she works for. Eunice can't read street signs, newspapers, or the yellow pages, and so feels totally inferior in this socially rarified world that includes fabulously expensive tribal art decorations and home computers.

Mrs. Coverdale alternates between silk pajamas and fur coats. And the children, half-brothers Melinda and Bobby, engage in hot, pseudo-incestuous sex when they aren't being cruel to their new domestic. Basically, all the Coverdales treat Eunice rudely by barking orders at her and proving to be stuck-up bastards. This description doesn't mean they deserve to die (as they eventually do, bloodily), but merely they're not princes either. They have no consideration for someone who isn't of their social class.

No doubt the Coverdales' cruelty reminds Eunice of her father. And in a sense, Eunice has found employment that puts her right back in the subservient role she played with the former patriarch. It's no wonder she grows increasingly angry and violent. Unfortunately, she doesn't realize that she's also being manipulated and victimized by her Scripture-quoting, heavily armed, fundamentalist, ChristiaNazi friend, Joan.

The Housekeeper reveals that Eunice is a lifelong victim: of schoolmates, of her father, of Joan, and, to a much lesser degree, of the Coverdales. But on the other hand, *The Housekeeper* also makes no

bones about the fact that Eunice is stark raving insane. She experiences weird visions involving the Coverdale family dog after she intentionally cuts her hand with a kitchen knife. Eunice has nightmares about her dead father too, and in one of the movie's several good jolts, he reaches out and grabs her. Finally, there's a bizarre sequence in which the Christmas turkey fountains up blood.

Eunice is nuts, her world view totally skewed by decades of abuse, but still—even as she commits totally unprovoked and unnecessary violence, one feels sorry for the character in the way that one feels sorry, perhaps, for Norman Bates in *Psycho*. Eunice is pitiful and sick, and she needs help.

Again—much like *The Attic*—*The Housekeeper* functions primarily as a character piece. One watches with dismay and increasing dread as Eunice falls under the spell of Joan, the nutcase who urges her to wage class warfare against the Coverdales. Viewers will understand that things are going to end badly for everybody, and indeed, they do.

That realization makes *The Housekeeper* a somewhat depressing film. There's really nobody to like in the movie, nobody who isn't a sinner to some degree. The movie involves cruel people (like Joan and Eunice's dad), vain, lazy yuppies (the Coverdales) and a sick woman (Eunice). Audiences can pick their poison and choose sides, but the paucity of decent human beings makes the movie seem more remote than it might have been.

The final killing spree, which features a powerful shotgun, could have been even more powerful (and in truth, it remains quite bracing) if, by misunderstanding and innuendo, Eunice was actually killing people that the viewers cared something for. Bobby and Melinda perhaps come closest to being portrayed as nice people, but they treat Eunice—and each other—badly. During the New Year's Eve massacre, for instance, Bobby doesn't even help Melinda, who has fallen into the snow while Eunice pursues. Nice. When Bobby subsequently gets shot, one doesn't exactly mourn.

At least when *The Housekeeper* concludes, one can be satisfied that the horror is over. The cycle of abuse can't continue because Eunice is dead. As is Joan. As are the Coverdales. The end.

“Director Tobe Hooper moves the action along briskly, and the movie quickly fills up with effects ... The restraint of the British players helps immensely until the end, when London is transformed into a pit of seething horror and the movie nearly comes apart. But what a ride!”—Bruce Eder, *Video Magazine*, May 1995, page 55.

“Tobe Hooper did sci-fi fans the supreme favor of combining a stylish and haunting space-opera with a good old-fashioned blood-sucker epic ... [He] has taken the tried and true A.I.P. style, complete with a futuristic Van Helsing type, and beefed it up with zombie gore and plenty of eye-popping nudity...”—R.T. St. Claire, *Sci-Fi Universe*, “13 Vampire Movies that Don’t Suck,” October/November 1994, page 24.

“Clearly inspired by Nigel Kneale’s splendid Quatermass adventures, screenwriters Dan O’Bannon and Don Jakoby got the spectacle and the weirdness right but the film lacks a much needed sense of humor ... [T]he overheated, confusing climax is a real jaw-dropper.”—Bill Warren, Bill Thomas, “Great Balls of Fire,” *American Film*, March 1986, page 70.

“*Lifeforce* may come to be considered a noteworthy science-fiction film precisely because it is so relentlessly unsentimental and edgy. This film displays a sensibility so odd, so unfamiliar, that it may prove one of the most subtly original films of the 1980s.”—Brooks Landon, *The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1988, page 276.

“Every time I watch this flick, I start out with a round of feminist scoffing—‘Okay, right, sure, this is all an excuse to have that chick wander round the movie totally naked.’ And then I get so wrapped up in the terror that I forget all that. This is one frightening flick ... the vampires, of course, but—in the wake of 9/11 and the civic dissolution of New Orleans—it’s the disorder in London and the authorities’ inability to do anything about it that’s so unsettling, and probably even more so than when the flick was first released.”—Mary Ann Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic.

“It’s a little bit Quatermass, a little bit ... well, it’s a little bit Quatermass, and some of the effects were fairly intense. Mathilda May is quite an eyeful, and the score by Henry Mancini is so over-the-top that it kind of works (with a little help from Michael Kamen). If nothing more, this film proves that Tobe Hooper was all over the place in this decade—his style was morphing from film to film at such a rapid pace that you couldn’t tell it was a Tobe Hooper film. It does

have an interesting British feel to it. Not bad, Tobe. Not Tobe's best film, however."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Steve Railsback (Commander Tom Carlsen); Peter Firth (Inspector Caine); Frank Finlay (Dr. Hans Fallada); Patrick Stewart (Dr. Armstrong); Michael Gothard (Bukovsky); Nicholas Ball (Derebridge); Aubrey Morris (Sir Percy); Nancy Paul (Ellen); Jim Hallam (Lamson); John Keegan (Guard); Mathilda May (Space Girl); Christopher Jagger (First Vampire); Bill Mallin (Second Vampire); Jerome Willis (Pathologist); Derek Benfield (Physician); John Woodnutt (Metallurgist); James-Forbes Robertson (The Minister); Peter Porteous (Prime Minister); Katherine Schofield (Prime Minister's Secretary); Owen Holder (First Scientist); Jamie Roberts (Rawlings); Russell Sommers (Navigation Officer).

CREW: Cannon Group presents a Golan-Globus Production of a Tobe Hooper film. *Casting:* Maude Spector, Ann Stanborough. *Costume Designer:* Carin Hooper. *Special Visual Effects:* John Dykstra. *Prosthetic Makeup Effects:* Nick Maley. *Special Effects:* John Gant. *Film Editor:* John Grover. *Director of Photography:* Alan Hume. *Production Designer:* John Graysmark. *Music:* Henry Mancini. *Performed by:* The London Symphony Orchestra. *Associate Producer:* Michael Kagan. *Based on the novel "The Space Vampires" by:* Colin Wilson. *Screenplay by:* Dan O'Bannon, Don Jakoby. *Produced by:* Manahem Golan, Yoram Globus. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 116 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The space shuttle *Churchill*, on a joint American-British mission to investigate Halley's Comet, discovers a gigantic derelict alien craft at the head of the comet. Commander Carlsen (Railsback) leads a team aboard and finds three humanoid bodies (two men, one female) stored perfectly in stasis. Bringing them back to Earth for study, he finds himself powerfully, hypnotically attracted to the female (May). Earth loses contact with the *Churchill* but Carlsen is rescued after thirty days and tells a terrifying story of space vampires: creatures that drain the living essence from human beings. Others are reluctant to believe him, even after the three alien bodies are recovered and transported to London's European Space and Research Study for examination by Dr. Fallada (Finlay). Before long, the naked female vampire escapes and begins spreading an alien infection that looks like zombification. Before long, London is in a state of siege as its citizens vampirize one another, and the giant spacecraft in Halley's Comet moves into Earth orbit to collect the souls or "lifeforce" of

those attacked. Tom Carlsen and government agent Caine (Firth) are the only men who stand a chance of stopping full-fledged, global disaster. Caine wants to use Carlsen's telepathic link with the female vampire to find and destroy her.

COMMENTARY: Tobe Hooper's spectacular but expensive box office failure *Lifeforce* is purely and simply a nightmare about the consequence of promiscuous sex in all its special shapes, sizes and varieties. The subject subtly informing the film is the rise of an insidious "gay plague" (Jerry Falwell's words), a dangerous sexually transmitted disease of the early 1980s, later identified as AIDS.

Lifeforce has much in common with John Carpenter's *The Thing*. Both films were critically reviled in their day, and yet both contemplate a shape-shifting evil passed from person to person in the fashion of a sexually transmitted disease. Both films were produced in the first half of the 1980s, when the issue coming to the forefront of public attention was the mysterious deaths of gay men in a so-called "slimming disease." This soon-to-be-epidemic was initially invisible to detection (before a blood test was found to be the determiner of infection), and the disease would subvert people slowly at first. Infected people would appear normal and healthy for a time, though in fact they were carriers of a secret, transmittable death. In both *The Thing* and *Lifeforce*, the disease is represented as malevolent alien creatures with designs on subverting the human form for inhuman needs.

Interestingly, both the Carpenter and Hooper effort also trade on a serious homosexual undercurrent. In *The Thing*, a deadly alien plague passes in the blood from person to person in an exclusively male population (at an Antarctic base). In *Lifeforce*, there is more than a single-sex group of victims (and the beautiful and often nude Mathilda May makes a fetching feminine evil), but there is nonetheless a significant emphasis on male-to-male infection. First, there is the jarring and impassioned kiss between Carlsen (Steve Railsback) and Dr. Armstrong (Patrick Stewart), an embrace that is inarguably homosexual in form (though May's Space Girl mentally inhabits Armstrong during the connection). Secondly, a male victim of the Space Girl awakens on the operating table early in the film and "mesmerizes" his male pathologist (a gay man?), converting the poor, entranced doctor into one of the sick "transmitters" of the infection.

Still, *Lifeforce* is not an explicit indictment of homosexuality so much as it is a warning against succumbing to all manners of sexual urges: a conservative message for a conservative time. Thus the film chooses

no favorites, and homosexuality is just one item on the smorgasbord of the human sexual equation. In fact, *Lifeforce* is as bold and daring about depicting sexual issues as any film in the 1980s. Throughout the movie, Hooper utilizes one powerful symbol to represent the wanton lust of the human being: the Space Girl. He parades her about naked throughout the picture, a groundbreaking decision in a mainstream entertainment. Yet in essence, her purpose is to take the viewer on a wild tour of sexual matters.



The Space Girl (Mathilda May) and Carlsen (Steve Railsback) are joined forever in the piercing finale of Tobe Hooper's *Lifeforce* (1985).

When Carlsen first boards the alien spacecraft early in the film, he finds its interior akin to a massive womb. This similarity is so telling that Carlsen blurts, "I feel like I've been here before." The tiny astronauts, probing deep into the long tunnel to the hidden chamber beyond, might well be the tiny sperm navigating a uterus. When they reach the hidden (egg?) Chamber, they discover May, and their instant lust creates new life in her. When she is returned to Earth, this creature created by the lust of her would-be victims/lovers, the so-called "feminine" in Carlsen's mind, begins her exploration of every

facet of human sexuality.

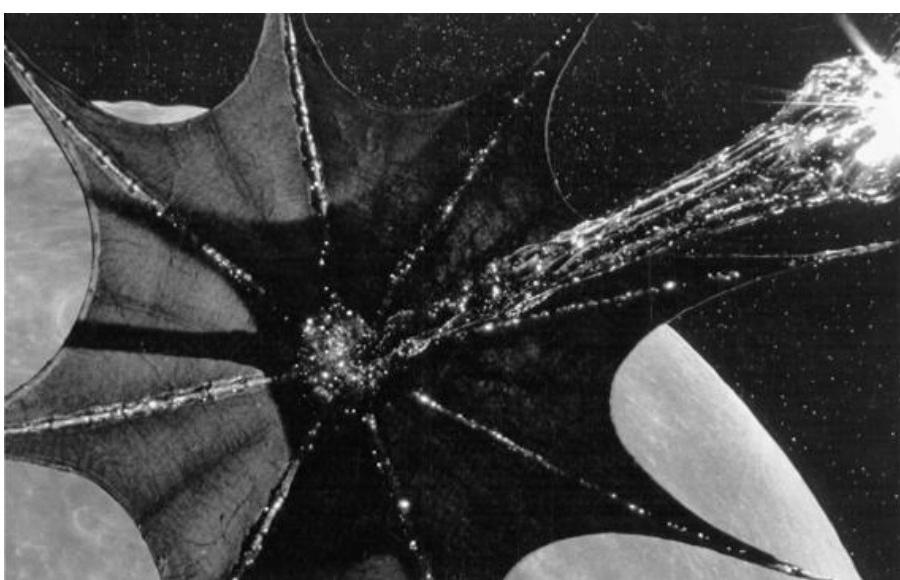
To wit, she encounters adulterous sex or infidelity (with a married man in a parked car); she tastes male-to-male contact in the body of Armstrong and his homosexual kiss with Carlsen. For a time, her consciousness enters the body of a sexy nurse who is a devoted masochist. This woman takes great joy in the fact that Carlsen has to beat information out of her. And even Inspector Caine acknowledges his own sexual persona when he notes specifically that he is a voyeur.

Even sex as grounds for political scandal is touched upon briefly, when the English prime minister spreads the infection to his unsuspecting but compliant secretary. Beyond all this, there is, of course, the fiery heterosexual coupling between Railsbak and May, a devastating sexual relationship that ends literally in a double penetration: by sexual genitalia and by a fatal stab with a sword's blade.

Considering the wide breadth of indiscriminate sexual behavior in evidence in *Lifeforce*, it is no surprise that the film relies on the "vampire" as its primary villain. Vampires remain the sexiest of all screen monsters: alluring, magnetic and filled with strange, unsated appetites. They thrive on a bodily fluid, blood, and they can "transmit" their sickness (vampirism) to unaware victims they seduce. Their kiss brings certain death. But the space vampires devour souls, not blood, and that's an important distinction in Hooper's allegory about the perils of promiscuous sex.

The film ends, appropriately enough, inside a grand British cathedral, a sanctuary of the pious and the penitent. There, the infected (i.e. the sexually wasted) await their final judgment, both spent and sick. Their souls are carried away on a beam of light which focuses on the altar, and these souls are dispatched to an alien spaceship, a place of suffering, no doubt, equivalent to the Christian Hell. This is a moral conclusion, a literalization of Christian puritanism: indulge in indiscriminate sex, and if it doesn't kill you outright, it'll make you sick with a plague.

It's a harsh comment, but given the decadent sexual proclivities of the 1970s and the reckoning period of AIDS awareness from the early 1980s and onward through the decade, an entirely appropriate one to be examined in a horror film.



The vampires' spaceship collects the souls of their victims. From *Lifeforce*.

This harshness is reflected outside the cinema of the 1980s too. Those who lived through it will remember the era as a time of extreme paranoia and fear about the ill-understood AIDS. For instance, when dealing with criminals who might have AIDS, police officers wore gloves and masks so as not to bring home the disease to family members. Some people actually feared sitting on toilet seats in public rest rooms because that act might give them AIDS.

And, in an episode that should shame all decent Americans, a thirteen-year-old hemophiliac, Ryan White—who had contracted the disease through a blood transfusion—was actually banned from attending classes by school officials.

President Ronald Reagan himself didn't even mention AIDS publicly until 1985, the year of *Lifeforce's* release. And even then, he fell prey to the already-rampant hysteria about the disease. "And yet, medicine has not come forth unequivocally and said, 'This we know for a fact, that it is safe,'" Reagan noted in a press conference on September 17, when asked if it was safe for children to attend school with AIDS victims, "And until they do, I think we just have to do the best we can with this problem."

Despite its ripped-from-the-headlines obsession on a sexually

transmitted threat, *Lifeforce* falters in its last act, at least to a degree. The film's opening acts are quite good, buttressed by rapid-fire dialogue, spectacular action, Mathilda May's nudity, restrained British acting, and so on. But the film takes a weird U turn in the last act and becomes a not-very-good zombies-on-the-loose production, an homage, apparently, to the oeuvre of George A Romero. The shambling victims of the plague besiege London and there are car accidents, explosions, chases and the like, and the intimate nature of the film is sacrificed in the name of spectacle. The story that the viewer cares about is the one involving Carlsen and his obsession with the Space Girl ... and the by the time the film finally gets back to that, much audience goodwill has been lost.

Still, *Lifeforce* is a fascinating, compelling, daring and timely film, much better (and much more layered) than its critics suggested at the time.

Monster Dog



Critical Reception

“*Monster Dog* is a real clunker, and its most redeeming quality is the presence of the legendary shock rocker.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Alice Cooper (Vincent Raven); Victoria Vera (Sandra); Carlos Santurio (Frank); Pepita James (Angela); Emilio Linder (Jordan); Jose Sarsa (Marilou); Charley Bravo (Townie); B. Barta Barri (Old Man); Ricardo Palacios (Sheriff Morrison); Luisa Maluenda (Deputy).

CREW: *Presented by:* Continental Motion Pictures. *Music:* Grupo Dichotomy. *Art Director:* Gumerindo Andrews. *Film Editor:* Antonio Jose Ochoa. *Director of Photography:* Jose Garcia Galisteo. *Special Effects:* Carol De Marchis. *Costume Designer:* Eugenia Escriva. *Executive Producers:* Helen Sarlui, Edward Sarlui. *Produced by:* Carlos Aureo. *Written and Directed by:* Clyde Anderson. *MPAA Rating:* No rating. *Running time:* 81 minutes.

INCANTATION: “When I was a kid, I could find the way home just by smell.... The bullshit ... it was unmistakable.”—Rock star Vincent

Raven (Alice Cooper) toasts his home town in the really terrible direct-to-video release, *Monster Dog*.

SYNOPSIS: The hottest rock star in the world, Vincent Raven (Cooper) returns to his mist-enshrouded home town after twenty years to re-shoot a music video that he doesn't like. Upon reaching the town, however, Raven learns from the local sheriff (Palacios) that a pack of wild dogs are on the loose and have already murdered five locals. Raven continues on to his mansion, even over the warnings of a crazed old man (Barri), and discovers that the kindly old caretaker has been murdered there.

As things get stranger, Vincent confides in his girlfriend that two decades earlier, something similar happened: His father—who suffered from a heart disease that made him bay at the moon like a werewolf—was mistaken for a lycanthrope and pitch-forked to death, then burned at the stake by a local mob. Now the locals are worried that Vincent is in town at precisely the same time as another attack of wild animals, and set out to kill Vincent and his friends. But by night, these human concerns are superseded by the approach of a monstrous, evil creature with a thirst for blood.

COMMENTARY: Talk about your monster dogs! You know a movie is in trouble when all the best reaction shots come from the canines stars, not the humans. Yet that's only the first problem with this atrociously dubbed, cheapjack foreign production, a truly inept bad movie that plays like a poor man's *An American Werewolf in London*.

Getting the good out of the way first, Alice Cooper can act, even though his voice is dubbed here. This guy has dynamite presence and he holds the screen even amidst the most ridiculous sequences. He performs (often directly to the camera) such tunes as “Identity Chrises”[sic] and “See Me in the Mirror” and elevates the film beyond its ridiculous premise.

And what a premise it is. The hottest rock star in the world is the son of a man who had a heart disease that mimics lycanthropy? So a Frankenstein-like mob poked him with a pitchfork and then burned him alive? Are we supposed to take any of this seriously? Even if one tries, a suspension of disbelief is difficult to achieve, in no small part because the special effects, both the titular “monster dog” and the Cooper-transformed werewolf in the finale, are utterly unconvincing rubber creations that jerk around like stiff mechanical puppets.

Historically, the film features several of the genre clichés we've all

become familiar with. There's the crazy old man spewing ridiculous warnings (a staple of the *Friday the 13th* movies). Here, he gets to say the classic line: "All of you are dead. The dogs will not spare you." He also utters another groaner: "Now, for better or worse, we have a new king who will live in the house of dead forever."

What the hell is he talking about?

Anyway, the film also features a character suffering from recurring (but thematically important nightmares) and awaking in the bed screaming and sweating. Yes, it's the famous "Stay Awake" shot, popularized mainly by the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. And, of course, the film involves the idea of bodily transformation, an obsession of the decade. It fails to say anything interesting about the subject, however.

And why call this thing *Monster Dog*? It's openly concerned with werewolves, not dogs (though there is a pack of wild dogs involved). There is at least one good thing about *Monster Dog* (besides Alice Cooper), and that's the fact that it's short. This movie is outta here at eighty-one minutes, and the last several minutes are a music video-like montage of Cooper singing "Identity Chrises" interspersed with footage from the film chosen at random.

Of *Monster Dog* I can only say that the movie makes more sense as a music video.

A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"This was an interesting sequel, particularly if, like me, you saw this film before Wes Craven's original. It doesn't really honor the Freddy Krueger mythology much (the dreams are almost secondary), but there are some vivid images here, and the degree of homophobia present is interesting. It would take the Wes Craven-penned follow-up in *Part III* to show how *Freddy's Revenge* didn't quite fit, but it's not a bad film, and anything with Clu Gulager can't be all bad."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mark Patton (Jesse Walsh); Kim Myers (Lisa Webber); Robert

Rusler (Ron Grady); Clu Gulager (Mr. Walsh); Hope Lange (Cheryl Walsh); Marshall Bell (Coach Schneider); Melinda O. Fee (Mrs. Webber); Thom McFadden (Mr. Webber); Sydney Walsh (Kerry); Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger); Edward Blackoff (Biology Teacher); Christie Clark (Angela); Lyman Ward (Mr. Grady); Donna Bruce (Mrs. Grady); Hart Sprager (Teacher); Allison Barron, Joan Willette (Girls on the Bus); Steve Estine (Policeman); Brian Wimmer (Do-Gooder); Robert Chaskin (Barbecue Boy); Kerry Remsen (Girlfriend); Kimberly Lynn (Patty); Steven Smith (Victim); Jonathan Hart (Spike).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Heron Communications Inc., and Smart Egg Pictures Present a Robert Shaye Production. *Casting:* Annette Benson. *Supervising Editor:* Arline Garson. *Film Editor:* Bob Brady. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Written by:* David Chaskin. *Line Producers:* Michael Murphy, Joel Soisson. *Executive Producers:* Stephen Diener, Stanley Dudelson. *Co-Producer:* Sara Risher. *Producer:* Robert Shaye. *Freddy Krueger makeup and effects created by:* Kevin Yagher. *Transformation Effects:* Mark Shostrom. *Special Puppet Effects:* Rick Lazarini. *"Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?" Performed by:* Bing Crosby. *Based on characters created by:* Wes Craven. *Directed by:* Jack Sholder. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I need you, Jesse. We've got special work to do here—you and me. You've got the body, I've got the brain..."—Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) attempts to possess young Jesse Walsh—a frequently shirtless Mark Patton—in *Freddy's Revenge*.

SYNOPSIS: The Walsh family moves into Nancy Thompson's old home at 1428 Elm Street, and the eldest child, teenager Jesse (Patton), begins to experience terrible night sweats and nightmares about child murderer and dream demon, Freddy Krueger (Englund). Krueger wants Jesse to kill for him—to be his arms and legs—and soon Jesse is adorning Freddy's old finger-knives and experiencing blackouts.

One night, he picks up the abusive high school gym coach, Schneider (Bell), at an S&M club and—with Freddy's assistance—sees to it that the sadist gets a taste of his own medicine. Jesse and his girlfriend Lisa (Myers) discover Nancy Thompson's diary and learn of her pitched battle with Krueger, but even this helpful information cannot keep Krueger from growing strong inside Jesse. Freddy bursts out of the boy's body, kills Jesse's best friend (Rusler), and then goes on a killing spree at Lisa's pool party. Lisa realizes that only the power of love can wring Jesse out of Freddy, and confronts the terrible monster at his power plant boiler room.

COMMENTARY: There are plenty of reasons to dislike *Freddy's Revenge* as an installment of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. Indeed, many fans of the Gloved One do dislike the picture. For one thing, Jack Sholder's sequel doesn't appear continuous with Wes Craven's original film, nor with the later series pictures, and it abandons much of the dream material that dominated the popular series.

Yet, taken on its own terms, *Freddy's Revenge* may be the only sequel to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* that can pass muster under its own steam, as a stand-alone rather than a sequel treading on past glories. In its own wacky way, *Freddy's Revenge* is an original work of art with a new theme. If the first film was a parable about the next generation, with a teenage girl digging and looking past the sins of her father, facing evil and then—finally—knowing when to turn her back on it, the sequel's story is even more groundbreaking in terms of its concerns. *Freddy's Revenge* focuses on a teen boy who is haunted by Freddy Krueger, but from another perspective, he undergoes a psychosis (which includes hallucinations and delusions) that represents the adolescent's fear of his own homosexuality.



A beefy-looking Freddy Krueger stalks the boys' shower room in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, a horror film about homosexual panic.

Homosexual panic? Could a mainstream horror movie really be about *that*? Well yes, in a specific sense, though on a wider field it's simply about adolescence and the changes that people undergo in puberty ... which include, in some cases, the acknowledgment of homosexuality. A close analysis of the film reveals that this is the case.

Consider first that the film's teen protagonist, Jesse (Mark Patton) is defined in sexual terms. He's revealed shirtless and in his underwear in the film on at least four occasions, but more to the point, these images connect him explicitly with a sexual awakening. After he wakes up writhing from one sweaty nightmare (which here resembles a kind of fever), the camera catches him adjusting his testicles as he gets out of bed. The very next shot is of a pair of eggs in a skillet. This conjunction of images continues the idea that Jesse is "hot and bothered" by something, something that's "burning" him up inside and keeping him from sleeping. Notably, Jesse also feels pressure at school from his male buddies to bed his girlfriend Lisa, played by Kim Myers. "Are you mounting her nightly or what?" he is asked, and because he isn't, this contributes to Jesse's angst.

Then, at school, the audience watches as Jesse is embarrassed and humiliated in a sexual fashion during gym class. Another kid, Grady, pulls his pants down in front of everybody, and the coach—a gay sadomasochist, by the way (no, I'm not kidding)—orders him to "assume the position." Grady then tells Jesse that "the guy gets his rocks off like this." Whoa!

Later, Jesse gets so hot and bothered in his sleep (ostensibly because of Freddy nightmares) that his furniture and bed lamp actually melt. Disturbed by such events, Jesse leaves his house—in the rain—to visit a local S&M Bar called Don's Place. The camera follows him inside the gay bar, and he happens to run into his coach. The coach takes him back to the gym and makes him run laps there. Question one: Why does Jesse, after his feverish sleep, head immediately to an S&M gay bar? And two, why does he meet his coach there? Third, if there isn't a gay sub-text to this film, then why does Jesse willingly succumb to the coach's after-hours orders to run laps? The coach is a teacher, for god's sake, not a policeman. He has no extra-curricular authority over Jesse and therefore the only rational reason for Jesse to return to the gym involves one very personal thing: Jesse's "secret" desire.

In the most blatantly sexual scene in the film, Freddy ties the coach to a shower head with a jump rope. He then whips the coach's naked ass with a towel several times before slashing him with the famous finger knives. The last scene of the film involves Jesse screaming like a girl,

gazing at his own gloved hand.

Consider also the timing and specifics of another important scene. Jesse attends Lisa's pool party and finally starts to get it on with her. He begins to get intimate, but then a monster tongue (Freddy's) leaps out of his mouth to lick her. Suddenly, Jesse can't perform, he can't "do it" with a willing, beautiful young woman. So what does he do? He runs immediately to Grady's house. He finds Grady stripped, shirtless in his bedroom and tells his friend, "I need you to let me stay here tonight ... There's something inside of me..."



Jesse (Mark Patton) discovers something ... unusual ... about himself in the boys' shower. A scene from Jack Sholder's *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*.

This is homosexual panic; Jesse's fear that as his sexual desire burns (remember those eggs on the skillet!), it's going to be unleashed in the "wrong" direction, with another man ... as it was directed at the coach in a sexual liaison gone wrong. His failure with a woman has exacerbated Jesse's panic, and so he runs to the true object, perhaps, of his desire, Grady, and basically begs for intimacy.

It's no surprise that during this bonding moment with Grady that Freddy finally bursts out of Jesse once and for all, because Freddy is

Jesse's id. When Jesse expresses desire (particularly homosexual desire), Freddy "comes out" to kill the object of that desire. First with the coach, then with Grady. The "unacceptable" same-sex feelings Jesse experiences—balanced against his fear—result in Freddy taking over and punishing those who prompt these feelings.

In keeping with this theory, notice that Freddy is only defeated when Lisa, representing heterosexuality, kisses him square on the lips and tells Jesse (vanished inside Freddy's skin) that she loves him. "Come back to me, Jesse," she begs. The lure of a woman, the love of a woman, is what destroys Freddy and brings back Jesse. He's no longer afraid that he's gay.

In *Freddy's Revenge*, Freddy doesn't inhabit dreams, *per se*, so much as he represents the adolescent fears of a sexually ambiguous young man who lives in anguish over the fact he might be gay, or have gay desires. Leaving aside the politics of "gayness" in America today, this is a pretty bold idea in a mainstream horror film, and it serves to distinguish this sequel from its brethren. It's not the retread that many accused it of being, but an entirely different animal. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

What is wrong is that at times the movie descends into laughable implausibility. The low point is the scene in which the family parakeet attacks the Walsh family in their living room. The poor bird spontaneously combusts and rains feathers down on everybody. As if this isn't ridiculous enough, the father, played by Clu Gulager, then accuses Jesse of rigging a cherry bomb on the bird. That explanation makes no sense, and neither does this scene. The film makes a half-hearted attempt to convey the idea that this house (formerly Nancy Thompson's) is haunted, but how or why Freddy makes birds fry is never explained satisfactorily.

The pool party set piece is also a failure. Freddy runs around on a mad slashing spree as the pool water boils and nearby fences are electrified (!), but again, how Freddy manages these tricks (especially since he's in "the real world" at this point in the tale), is unclear. Also, how does he manage to materialize and de-materialize at will once he's a manifestation of our reality? Wes Craven was very careful in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to make certain that a set of rules were obeyed; that Freddy could do certain things in the dream world, but not reality. Here, that distinction is lost totally. It's also confusing that Freddy's finger knives sometimes grow organically out of his fingers and sometime are on the famous glove.

Because of inconsistencies like these, the boiler room finale is also botched, at least to a degree. Lisa heads to the boiler room (even though Marge established that it burned to the ground in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) and is met there by dogs or rats with human faces? Whoa! Again, this isn't the dream world folks; this is reality. What are those things and how did they get there?

Also, *Freddy's Revenge* has some loose ends. Gulager and Lange have significant roles as the Walshes, but then they disappear and their story arc is never resolved. Do they wonder what's happening with Jesse? In fact, the movie never explains the aftermath of Freddy's attack on the pool. Fences fry kids, the pool boils them, glass doors explode when Freddy jumps through them, and kids are hacked to death. Jesse is already a suspect in these cases, so how does he get off the hook?

It's best, perhaps, not to focus on these things when watching *Freddy's Revenge* and instead simply tip your hat to a director, Jack Sholder, who has done something original and different with a sequel. Adolescence is that tender time of awakening for teenagers, that time when choices are made and destinies forged. Heterosexual boys sometimes wonder if they'll ever get to have sex with a woman. This movie takes that fear, and a fear of homosexuality, and weaves an interesting horror movie around the material. Frankly, Freddy is almost immaterial to this movie, except as the embodiment of Jesse's anguish.

Re-Animator

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"At first, it just makes you smile or giggle, but pretty soon you laugh out loud, and as the ghoulish jokes escalate, you feel revivified, light-headed and happy ... The picture is close to being a silly ghoulie classic—the bloodier it gets, the funnier it is."—Pauline Kael, *Hooked*, A Williams Abraham Book, 1989, page 67.

"The macabre fun lies in the film's emphasis on how much trouble all those flailing zombies become, including the dean and a jealous faculty member, whose severed head in a steel pan at one point tongues the heroine ... A genre standout, its future as a midnight staple for the strong-of-stomach seems assured."—Jay Carr, "Re-

Animator: A Gory Story,” The Boston Globe, November 16, 1985, page 8.

“...an unremittingly gory and silly horror movie...”—Lou Lumenick, “*Re-Animator: Med School Gut Course*,” *The Record*, October 18, 1985, page 22.

“[E]asily the goriest film ever made ... *Re-Animator* is also a lot of fun ... And there is wit. There’s some in the performance by Jeffrey Combs (as West, the re-animator), and there’s a good deal in the dialogue, which on occasion even tries to be droll.”—Bill Cosford, “*Re-Animator: Fun, If You Can Stand It*,” *The Miami Herald*, November 19, 1985, page 6B.

“This film was quite a jolt on its first release. From the ‘homage’ score that borrowed some of the stylings of Herrmann’s classic score to *Psycho* to the oddest film sense of humor since *Evil Dead*, this movie had a little bit of everything. From fetching Barbara Crampton to Jeffrey Combs playing with a level of intensity that might have crippled another film, *Re-Animator* pulls out all the stops, mixing humor and horror (with the horror winning in each confrontation) and bringing gore galore to a truly unforgettable film. Stuart Gordon has never quite lived up to the promise he showed with this film (although he’s done some good films since, certainly), but there’s no denying he hit one out of the park in his first at-bat. H.P. Lovecraft was not particularly fond of his Herbert West stories, but thanks to Stuart Gordon and company, we love ’em.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Abbott (Dr. Dan Caine); Barbara Crampton (Megan Halsey); David Gale (Dr. Carl Hill); Robert Sampson (Dean Alan Halsey); Jeffrey Combs (Dr. Herbert West); Carolyn Purdy-Gordon (Dr. Harrod); Peter Kent (Melvin); Gerry Black (Mace); Ian Patrick Williams (Swiss Professor); Barbara Pieters (Nurse); Bunny Summers (Swiss Woman Doctor); Al Berry (Dr. Gruber); Dick Pendelton, Gene Scherer (Swiss Policemen); James Ellis, James Earl Cathay (*Psycho* Ward Guards).

CREW: Brian Yuzna Presents an Empire Picture Release. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Art Director:* Robert A. Burns. *Film Editor:* Lee Percy. *Music Composed and Conducted by:* Richard Band. *Casting:* Anthony Barnao. *Executive Producers:* Michael Avery, Bruce Curtis. *Associate Producers:* Bob Greenberg, Charles Donald Story. *Executive in*

Charge of Production: Dennis Murphy. *Screenplay:* Dennis Paoli, William J. Norris, Stuart Gordon. *Produced by:* Brian Yuzna. *Special Effects and Special Makeup Effects by:* Anthony Douldin, John Naulin. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dan Bradely. *Directed by:* Stuart Gordon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young doctor-in-training, Herbert West (Combs)—obsessed with conquering death—leaves Switzerland under suspicious circumstances and transfers to Miskatonic Medical School in Arkham, Massachusetts. Once there, he boards with another student, Dr. Dan Caine (Abbott), who is dating Dean Halsey's daughter, Megan (Crampton). Caine learns that West is conducting experiments in the basement with a glowing chemical re-agent that, when administered to the brain, can re-animate the dead. Dean Halsey believes the work is an abomination, revokes Caine's student loan and expels West.

In the morgue, things go horribly wrong as West experiments on a human subject and Dean Halsey is accidentally murdered. West uses the re-agent on Halsey, bringing the dean back to life as a zombie, which prompts the interest of a jealous academic competitor, Dr. Hill (Gale). West and Hill fight, and Hill is decapitated. But once re-animated, Hill (body and head) steals West's valuable serum and abducts the beautiful Megan for lecherous purposes. West and Caine race to save Megan from Hill, but learn that the neurosurgeon has re-animated a number of corpses to serve as his minions.

COMMENTARY: “We can defeat death,” Dr. Herbert West says with glee early in Stuart Gordon’s frenzied and flurried *Re-Animator*. On the surface, this declaration places this odd little scientist in the same camp as Frankenstein. Only difference? Herbert West is not truly a thoughtful genius, only a dork and perpetual overachiever. His drive to continue beyond the boundaries of death is a symptom of his pride (like Frankenstein’s) but based not on his desire to keep alive the ones he loves, since he loves only himself. Instead, West desires to succeed only to prove he is right, that others are wrong. That’s the core issue of *Re-Animator*, a fast-paced zombie horror that actually concerns the cut-throat world of academia more than necromancy.



Dr. Herbert West (Jeffrey Combs) subdues a zombie in the fast-paced, over-the-top H.P. Lovecraft adaptation *Re-Animator* (1985).

Publish or perish. Succeed or fail. College life isn't as easy as it seems for those professors who give lectures at the heads of classrooms. Suddenly a student upstart like West appears and ruins everything. Thus *Re-Animator*, an adaptation of an H.P. Lovecraft story, sees West duking it out with the jealous Dr. Hill, a professor on staff at Miskatonic University, but one who clearly doesn't have the brain-power of West. He would steal for glory rather than innovate himself.

This pissing contest between student and professor goes to crazy lengths in the inventive and gory *Re-Animator*. West decapitates Hill with a shovel, and then keeps his head as a trophy. He re-animates Hill's head too, but Hill should have quit while he was a head. Even in his compromised state he still desires credit for West's work and so becomes a zombie master himself, raising minions to his bidding. How he feels the scientific community will receive the work of a headless corpse is his business, I guess, but let's just say that death and decapitation make Hill a bit unhinged. In the end, even Hill's re-animated, apparently spring-loaded intestines are wired to attack West.

While this rivalry goes on, one senses that *Re-Animator* also

accomplishes something rather clever with the Frankenstein myth. Specifically, the film bifurcates the Frankenstein mad-scientist attributes into two characters working in tandem. West boasts the skill and brains to re-animate the dead, but it his is friend, Dr. Caine, who characterizes the deep-seated personal reason for needing the experiments to continue. He must conquer death to save the lovely Megan, his intended. By splitting these attributes into two men, *Re-Animator* becomes a running dialogue between two interesting points of view.

Re-Animator boasts a campy, cartoon quality that probably keeps it from becoming quite the classic critics stated it was back in 1985. The fast-moving corpses remain scary and pose a threat, and the scenes involving Hill carrying around his severed head are genuinely funny (one critic noted that this film is the only one in history in which a head tries to give head). Still, the film falters by cribbing the score from *Psycho* (a blatant steal that takes one out of the action), and the performances are over-the-top. There's also something two-dimensional about the production design and performances, as though the movie hasn't quite successfully leapt from page to stage. What continues to make *Re-Animator* a treat, even after twenty-two years, is a two-prong vitality. The pace is strong, and the corpses are fast.

The Return of the Living Dead

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Whereas ... *Day of the Dead* suffered from being too unendurably gory and somber, *The Return of the Living Dead* is uncommonly witty ... O’Bannon’s best contribution to the material ... is his pitting the walking dead against what he views as their live counterparts—punks ... [S]omehow, there’s a certain insidious charm to all of this.”—Joe Baltake, “A Zombie Movie That Plays Gore for Laughs,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, August 19, 1985, page 42.

“The whole point is excess, and O’Bannon’s good at getting to that point. But the film is so clearly meant for giggles that it packs nowhere near the emotional punch of one of Romero’s, which are truly dreadful. O’Bannon’s version is quite lighthearted...”—Bill Cosford, “A Return to Gory Ghouls,” *The Miami Herald*, August 19, 1985, page 5D.

“...a slickly made thriller, a first-rate example of the horror genre ... The movie is filled with shocks and thrills—a good entertainment.”—George Williams, “Brain-Eating Zombies: It’s Great Stuff, But Why?” *Sacramento Bee*, August 16, 1985, page S14.

“This was one of those ‘sympathy’ films where you’d buy your ticket because at least somebody was keeping the genre alive (with punk rockers, yet!), and you start realizing this film is not only not crap, it’s hilariously funny, scary, wonderfully cast and wonderfully sick. Dan O’Bannon takes the title from a John Russo novel and leaves the novel behind (now, if only somebody would make a good, faithful adaptation of that novel!), to make a film that blew *Day of the Dead* out of theaters with its sheer infectious fun. As one of two official zombie comedies (joined of course, by the blissful *Shaun of the Dead*), this film didn’t quite honor Mr. Romero’s rules, but it didn’t insult them, either. It’s still one of the most enjoyable zombie films ever made.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Clu Gulager (Burt); James Karen (Frank); Don Calfa (Ernie); Thom Matthews (Freddy); Miguel Nunez (Spider); Brian Peck (Scuz); John Philbin (Chuck); Linnea Quigley (Trash); Beverly Randolph (Tina); Jewel Shepard (Casey); Mark Venturini (Suicide); Jonathan Terry (Colonel Glover); Cathleen Cordell (Colonel’s Wife); John Durbin (Radio Corpse #1); David Bond (Radio Corpse #2); Leigh Drake (Dispatcher); John Stuart West (Riot Cop #1); Allan Trautman (Tarman).

CREW: Hemdale Film Corporation Presents a Fox Film Ltd. Production. *Casting:* Stanzi Stokes. *Production Associate:* Graham Jennings. *Film Editor:* Robert Gordon. *Music Composed by:* Matt Clifford. *Production Design:* William South. *Director of Photography:* Jules Brenner. *Executive Producers:* John Daly, Derek Gibson. *Co-Producer:* Graham Henderson. *Story:* Rudi Ricci, John Russo, Russell Streiner. *Screenplay by:* Dan O’Bannon. *Produced by:* Tom Fox. *Directed by:* Dan O’Bannon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION: “The events portrayed in this film are all true. The names are the real names of real people and real organizations.”—Opening card for Dan O’Bannon’s rollicking *The Return of the Living Dead*.

SYNOPSIS: At Uneeda Medical Supply Warehouse, employees Frank

(Karen) and Freddy (Matthews) visit the basement to view the barrels accidentally shipped there by the U.S. Army fourteen years ago during a crisis that was depicted (with some changes to protect the innocent) in the film *Night of the Living Dead*. An accident ends up rupturing the seal on one of the barrels, releasing a zombie (Trautman) and incapacitating Frank and Freddy.

When the duo awaken, they learn that the poisonous chemical has also revived a cadaver in the freezer, so they contact the boss, Burt (Gulager), and see if his embalmer friend Ernie (Calfa) will help them destroy the zombies in his crematorium. However, the ashes combine with rain in the atmosphere to bring down a deadly acid rain that revives all the corpses in nearby Resurrection Cemetery. It just so happens that's where Freddy's girlfriend Tina (Randolph) is partying with a bunch of her punk rocker friends, including the death-obsessed Trash (Quigley), Suicide (Venturini) and Spider (Nunez). Before long, the zombies are on the march, seeking to eat human brains to alleviate the "pain of being dead." Worse, paramedics confirm that Frank and Freddy have no pulse, no blood pressure, no heartbeat ... and are suffering from rigor mortis...

COMMENTARY: *The Return of the Living Dead* is an imaginative, funny and timely re-invigoration of the ghoulish material George A. Romero pioneered back in 1968. Especially with its accent on comedy, one might expect that director Dan O'Bannon's variation on a theme would be a total bust (and indeed, early buzz on *Return* was negative), but quite to the contrary, this is one amazing horror film. Pitched as a perfect combination of humor and horror, it ably reflects the punk nihilism of the age and the enduring fear of nuclear apocalypse. The film also depicts death in starker terms than many such efforts, and describes with a strong sense of inevitability how a dangerous situation can go from bad, to worse, to tragic, to national disaster. *Return* surpasses Romero's 1985 feature *Day of the Dead* in terms of its ingenuity, social value and overall entertainment quotient, and consequently it's also one of the best horror films of the decade.

The *Night of the Living Dead* aesthetic was updated and tweaked to include the 1980s, the decade of the punk rocker, in *Return*. Punks are nihilists who see no tomorrow at all, and dwell in a culture of death music and death imagery. Appropriately, *Return* focuses on a group of punks who bear names like Trash, Suicide and Scum, their very names indicating their lack of respect for the world, and themselves. They see themselves as nothing in a world that doesn't value them, and won't survive an apocalypse. Obsessed with death and murder, these characters actually worship ugliness and urban blight. When facing

the wasteland of Uneeda's industrial park, Trash (Linnea Quigley) notes. "I like it. It's a statement."



Back from the grave and ready to party? Trash (Linnea Quigley)

feels up a punk cohort in Dan O'Bannon's nihilistic *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985).

Even the dreams of these characters focus on grim death-oriented details. "Do you ever fantasize about being killed? Ever wonder what would be the most horrible way to die?" Trash asks her friends, almost immediately before going into a nude striptease atop a stone grave monument. The message is clear: Like many such youths from this time, she gets off on the idea of death. Her "most horrible way to die" is oddly sexual too, a bunch of men "eating" her alive. Sex and death, co-mingled in the culture of the bomb. It's quite a powerful statement, even before the zombies arrive.

Then, of course, the dead return to life and begin killing the punks, who suddenly find that death isn't so romantic or enjoyable as they might have hoped. O'Bannon adds punk music to the soundtrack at critical junctures, making the audience aware that, in some sense, the death pop culture is also responsible for the apocalypse. Zombies rise to the tune "Party Time," a set piece crafted to resemble a music video, and overrun the chapel to the ludicrous and amusing song, "The Surfing Dead." The music plays as counterpoint to the action on screen, and underlines the punk ethos of the film.

The punk characters, "stupid fuckers" by their own admission, don't really help each other when they could. Instead they run around and die. Those who do survive see their chosen philosophy of life proven correct when, in the end, the United States government nukes the city to destroy the living dead. The nuclear apocalypse the punk generation fears has come to pass. And—as many suspected—it's friendly fire, not an example of Communist aggression.

Night of the Living Dead has been viewed through the lens of racial issues in 1960s America. The shopping mall setting of *Dawn of the Dead* in 1979 is universally read as a statement on rampant consumerism in the disco decade. *Return of the Living Dead* is the true heir to this legacy, because it absorbs the Zeitgeist of Reagan's eighties, fears of nuclear apocalypse, punk rock and all. Romero's *Day of the Dead* ends atypically happy, with Sarah having discovered a Caribbean paradise with two friends, far from the plague of the dead destroying America. Before *Land of the Dead*, it was the only film in the trilogy to end on a semi-upbeat note, rather than a dark one. Indeed, the end of *Day of the Dead* suggests that sometimes it's okay to ignore the big issues and run away to paradise to "make babies."

That's a valid point of view. But *Return of the Living Dead*'s hopeless, nihilistic end (which resembles, in some fashion, *The Crazies*) makes a far more courageous and uncompromising statement. When disaster strikes, the film suggests, the government is the true enemy. The Feds (and the Army) made the zombies; they stored the zombies (unsafely, of course); and they "solved" the problem with a nuclear missile. No wonder a generation grew up in fear of Reagan's finger on the nuclear trigger. "We start bombing in five minutes" is a joke without a funny punchline and so it's no wonder that a culture obsessed with death grew up in America.

However, *Return* is more than a reflection of nuclear fears and the punk aesthetic. In a logical if horrifying way, it depicts how a manageable situation can deteriorate and become unmanageable. The incident in Uneeda's Basement results in a visit to the mortuary to kill the "undead." The corpses are then burned in a fire, but the smoke rises from the crematorium. The chemical then comes back down to Earth as rain, and falls into the graveyard ... producing more dangers. It's the cycle of life, or death, and this is the first time that a living dead movie has explicitly found a message to pass the "disease" in a way other than direct contact (meaning bites).

The message is an environmental one: toxic chemicals are pumped into the atmosphere and have a toxic effect. Even this is a timely allusion to a fear of the 1980s. On December 3, 1983, two dozen members of Congress (including several Republican Senators) wrote a letter to President Reagan complaining about a new threat to the American people and the environment: acid rain. Although the Clear Air Act of 1990 alleviated political pressure, during the age of *Return of the Living Dead*, acid rain was a hot-button issue. In the film, it's zombie rain, but the allusion is nonetheless plain.

Return also attempts to address specific issues about the process of dying (and what the body goes through after death, too) that other living dead movies have ignored. For instance, exposure to the 245 Trioxin leaves Uneeda employees Frank and Freddy in dire straits. In fact, it kills them, but they don't know it until their bodies begin to go through the process of rigor mortis.

Return of the Living Dead thus explains in frightening and nauseating detail how rigor mortis begins in the brain and settles in the muscles. As Freddy and Frank feel worse and worse, paramedics arrive to take vital signs in a classic scene. They find no heartbeats, no blood pressure and no pulse. Instead, they locate blood starting to pool. Big purple blotches of blood are visible on their backs. As for the zombies,

they eat brains because it hurts to die; there's "the pain of being dead" that apparently only brains can help alleviate. "I can feel myself rotting," reveals one zombie. This dark film proves exceedingly grim about not just dying, but the condition of death itself. Talk about nihilism.

The entire film is graced by an energy and vitality that borders on the hysterical, and the gallows humor, in particular, creates laughter. "Send more paramedics," says one of the zombies while talking on a walkie-talkie. It's not like he's asking for more help, however. It's as though he's ordering a pizza.

Return also points to the 1990s age of horror in the way it acknowledges the existence of *Night of the Living Dead* and zombies in movie history. All the characters act on their knowledge of Romero films, and are disappointed when the truth is different than silver screen fiction. "You mean the movie lied?" Freddy demands, feeling disappointed when he learns that decapitation won't destroy these ghouls. O'Bannon's movie wittily makes a point how popular these films have become, and how "accepted as fact" horror movie rules can be.

Funny and furious, mean and scary, *Return of the Living Dead* is unrelenting in its pace, accomplished in its performances, and dark to the core of its black heart. It's just the kind of thing the genre needed more of: a respectful but inventive re-wiring of an old myth with new zeal, fresh inspiration, and an eighties sensibility. These zombies are indeed back from the grave and ready to party, and that's one invitation you won't want to pass up.

LEGACY: *Return of the Living Dead* generated a number of less than satisfactory sequels, including 1987's *Return of the Living Dead 2*, which became a kiddie adventure, and *Return of the Living Dead III* (1991), which was only tangentially related to the first film.

Silver Bullet



Critical Reception

"...one more in the litany of missed opportunities made from King product."—Harlan Ellison, *Harlan Ellison's Watching*, Underwood-Miller, 1989, page 251.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gary Busey (Uncle Red); Everett McGill (Reverend Lowe); Corey Haim (Marty); Megan Follows (Jane Coslaw); Terry O'Quinn (Sheriff Joe Haller); Bill Smitrovich (Andy Fairton); Robin Groves (Nan Coslaw); Lawrence Tierney (Owen Knopfler); Kent Broadhurst (Herb Kincaid); Heather Simmons (Tammy Sturmfuller); William Newman (Virgil Cuts); Rebecca Fleming (Mrs. Sturmfuller); James A. Baffico (Mr. Sturmfuller); Sam Stoneburner (Mayor O'Banion).

CREW: *Presented by:* Dino De Laurentiis. *Creatures created by:* Carlo Rambaldi. *Costume Designer:* Clifford Capone. *Production Designer:* Giorgio Postiglione. *Casting:* Jeremy Ritzer. *Special Effects Makeup:* Michael McCracken, Sr. *Director of Photography:* Armando Nannuzzi. *Music:* Jay Chattaway. *Film Editor:* Daniel Loewenthal. *Associate Producer:* John M. Eckert. *Based on the Novelette "Cycle of the Werewolf" by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* Martha Schumacher. *Directed by:* Daniel Attias. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the spring of 1976, a werewolf attacks the residents of Tarker's Mills. One of the victims is a woman who was about to commit suicide, and another the town prankster, young Brody, who is best friend of a crippled adolescent named Marty (Haim). Marty drives a motorized wheelchair built by his Uncle Red, called the Silver Bullet, and has a love-hate relationship with his older sister, Jane (Follows), who feels that her parents always take Marty's side because of his disability.

The horrible attacks continue and a lynch mob goes out to hunt the beast. The werewolf kills several of the vigilantes, resulting in a mass funeral overseen by Reverend Lowe (McGill). Later, driving a new-and-improved Silver Bullet, Marty battles the werewolf, shooting it in the eye with a firecracker rocket. The next day, the reverend is seen wearing an eye-patch and Jane and Marty struggle to convince Red that the man of the cloth is actually the wolfman. Realizing he has been exposed, Reverend Lowe attempts to kill Marty by running him off the road, but his efforts fail.

On Halloween, the last night of the full moon, Lowe plans to kill Marty and his sister. But with Red's help, and with a newly minted silver bullet made from a crucifix, Marty and Jane are ready to face the werewolf one last time.

COMMENTARY: *Silver Bullet* is a hokey, harmless and at times

suspenseful horror film based on Stephen King material. It's virtually guaranteed to be nobody's favorite werewolf movie, or favorite horror movie starring resourceful, monster-hunting kids, for that matter. But this film concerning a priest-turned-werewolf who kills off citizens he deems "sinful" is good enough to pass muster on a rainy afternoon.

"I'm a little too old to be playing *Hardy Boys Meets the Werewolf*," Gary Busey's character wisecracks, yet that's almost precisely how the movie plays. *Silver Bullet* remembers two crucial things that other kiddie horror movies (such as *Lady in White* and *The Monster Squad*) forget: (a) kids don't like to be talked down to; (b) and more importantly, kids like to be scared.

Consequently, *Silver Bullet* doesn't spare the children in the film some tense moments, nor does it hold back on the violence. The movie features a violent decapitation in its opening moments, and then, not long after, a lengthy violent attack on a pregnant woman as the town werewolf tears her to shreds. Later, director Daniel Attias stages a suspenseful scene in an abandoned covered bridge. Marty has driven his wheelchair-turned-motorcycle (the *Silver Bullet*) to a dead end there, and the priest—driving a car—pulls up behind him. It looks like the end of the road for Marty, our hero, but how he escapes, and how the werewolf is foiled, are entertaining and at least borderline plausible.

As in many film adaptation of King stories, the characters are drawn crudely and speak crassly, and thus come off as rather silly at points, but the movie still gets the job done, proving to be yet another example of the "don't worry/be afraid" dynamic so prevalent in the decade. Here, a respected member of the community, a reverend, hides a dark underside, a murderous intolerance for those who don't share his faith and world view. What's very funny is that the misbehaving, hypocritical priest imagines his whole congregation turning into werewolves before his eyes. The makeup is ludicrous, but it's a trip to see lycanthropes dressed up in their Sunday finest.

Another would-be scary scene (a redneck mob hunting the werewolf) also seems played for laughs, and the movie's warm narration proves utterly ridiculous since the events of the film occur in 1976, and the narration, by Marty's older sister, Jane, is ostensibly happening in the present, meaning 1985. Jane could be not more than 25, yet she sounds like a wizened old lady remembering a long ago past from dusty memory.

Still, it's hard to get mad at a movie that features lines of dialogue like

one redneck's impertinent question to another, "Are you going to make lemonade in your pants?" Am I being too forgiving of this film? Maybe so, but I've seen bad werewolf movies (*Howling II—IV*) and this movie, for all its silliness, still knows how to make you jump. Right after you finish giggling.

The Stuff



Critical Reception

"Larry Cohen strikes again, a horror film apparently inspired by Fluff. His sense of humor was never more warped than in this film, with probably Cohen's most impressive cast ever, and Michael Moriarity continuing to bring his warped self to Cohen's weirdness. Cohen's films are never perfect, but there's always something special about them, and *The Stuff* is no exception."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Moriarity (David "Mo" Rutherford); Andrea Marcovicci (Nicole); Garrett Morris ("Chocolate Chip" Charlie W. Hobbs); Paul Sorvino (Colonel Spears); Danny Aiello (Mr. Vickers); Patrick O'Neal (Fletcher); Scott Bloom (Jason); James Dixon (Postman); Alexander Scourby (Evans); Gene O'Neill (Scientist); Catherine Schultz (Waitress); James Dukas (Gas Attendant); Peter Hock (Miner); Colette Blonigani (Jason's Mother); Frank Telfer (Jason's Father); Brian Bloom (Jason's Brother); Harry Bellaves (Old Miner); Rutanya Alda (Psychologist); Ann Dane (Hostess); David Snell (Doctor); Beth Tegarden (Girl in Lab); Edward Power (Executive). Brooke Adams, Abe Vigoda, Clara Peller, Laurine Landon (Guests in Commercials).

CREW: A Larco Production. *Film Editor:* Armond Lebowitz. *Music:* Anthony Guefen. *Director of Photography:* Paul Glickman. *Executive Producer:* Larry Cohen. *Produced by:* Paul Kurta. *Stunt Coordinator:* Herry Hewitt. *Associate Producer:* Barry Shils. *Special Visual Effects:* David Allen, David Stipes, Dreamquest Images, Jim Danforth Effects Associates, Jim Doyle, Theatrical Engines, John Lambert, Paul Gentry. *Mechanical Effects:* Steve Neill, Rick Stratton, Ed French, Mike Madd. *Commercial jingles written, composed and produced by:* Richard Seaman. *Written and Directed by:* Larry Cohen. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You stay in your room until you finish that. Then you can be part of the family again.”—Parental pressure to eat the dangerous “Stuff” in Larry Cohen’s masterpiece about dangerous products bought and sold in an amoral business climate, *The Stuff*.

SYNOPSIS: When a new dessert food called “The Stuff” takes America by storm, a threatened ice cream conglomerate calls on the services of an unethical, down-on-his-luck ex-FBI agent-turned-industrial spy, Mo Rutherford (Moriarity), to discover its composition. He discovers that it’s unknown even to the chemists who approved it at the FDA, who are now either deceased or out of the country.

Mo teams up with “Chocolate Chip” Charlie (Morris), the former owner of a cookie company who has seen his business sold out from under him to the makers of the Stuff. With the help of a famous commercial director, Nicole (Marcovicci), and a boy named Jason (Scott Bloom) who has seen his entire family transformed by eating the Stuff, Mo follows the mystery to Georgia and the so-called manufacturing plant. He discovers that the Stuff is some kind of intelligent, natural muck that oozes right out of the earth and is being shipped by tanker trucks to distributors, fast-food restaurants, and grocery freezer shelves.

A symbiotic life form, the Stuff is rapidly taking over all of America, making the infected do its bidding (and talk as though they live in TV commercials). Mo calls on Colonel Spears (Sorvino), a right-wing crackpot, to help him stop the alien invasion of America by the Stuff.

COMMENTARY: *The Stuff* is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* for the 1980s. In this wicked Larry Cohen film, eating this tasty treat turns consumers into “Stuffies,” a new generation of Pod People who speak in enthusiastic terms of their favorite product, as though reciting information from a commercial jingle. The Stuff jingle itself is a perfect example of eighties excess: “Enough is never enough!”

Cohen’s film satirizes fast food franchises (right down to a cameo by Clara Peller, Wendy’s spokesperson and “Where’s the Beef?” lady), TV commercial hype, sudden fads in pop culture and the like, but most cogently it suggests how a corrupt federal government can be lobbied and purchased by powerful commercial and business interests. A conspiracy of a few to deliver to marketplace an unsafe “taste that delivers” actually undermines national security. The FDA gets co-opted, competition gets squashed but who cares, since “the product of tomorrow” rakes in the big bucks. Today, a danger like this is even more plain, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry, which has

lobbied successfully to see unsafe medicine affirmed for sale by the FDA.

The Stuff itself is a blob-like menace, a combination between protoplasm and whipped cream that appears mighty tasty and has been mined right out of the Earth (meaning that it's all natural!). The rub is that the enigmatically named Stuff is alive, and people aren't really eating it ... it's eating them! In some dramatic but cheesy special effect sequences, the U.S. Army—in the grand tradition of 1950s ventures like *Invaders from Mars* (1953)—strikes back at the menace to America, which an extreme right wing general played by Paul Sorving rightly equates with Communism. He's right, since Stuffies all talk alike and take their marching orders from the same weird source. Not the Kremlin, but the whipped cream.

Michael Moriarity stars as Mo, a corporate spy “keeping the world safe for ice cream.” He’s rogue, crook and hero wrapped into one character, and it’s another quirky turn for this unusual actor. Moriarity is a valuable player (as he is in *Q: The Winged Serpent* [1982]) because he grounds the film with a sense of reality and humanity that even the some campier moments (and there are a few) can’t undermine.

The Stuff also includes some gory sequences involving Stuff regurgitation, but this Cohen horror is most effective in the way it demonstrates how even the most dangerous product can be peddled on billboards, in fast food franchises and the ubiquitous TV commercial. Demand—even for what ails us—can be created overnight with the best ad campaigns money can buy. Now that’s a scary thought.

Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brian Schulz (Staff Sgt. Jack Stryker); Robert Rickman (Walter J. Jackson); John Manfred (David Miller); Tim Quill (Tim Tyler); Sam Raimi (Cult Leader); Cheryl Hansen (Sally); Perry Mallette (Otis); Dandy (Whiskey); Rick Hudson (Kennel Owner); Pam Lewis (Mom); Jim Griffin (Dad); Theo Kruszewski (Kid); Connie Craig (Bald Cult Girl); Ivitch Fraser (Young Cult Girl); Terry Lynn Brumfield (Sleazy Cult Girl); Ted Raimi (Chain Man); Kirk Haas (The Stabber); Al

Johnston (Big Biker); Chuck Morris (Puke Biker); Scott Mitchell (Mad Hatter); Scott Spiegel (Pin Cushion).

CREW: An Action Pictures Production. *Casting:* Brian Lawrence, Julie Jackunas. *Music:* Joseph Lo Duca. *Photography and Editing:* Josh Becker. *Story:* Josh Becker, Sheldon Lettich, Bruce Campbell. *Screenplay by:* Josh Becker, Scott Spiegel. *Executive Producers:* Shirley and Arnold Becker. *Produced and directed by:* Josh Becker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sergeant Stryker (Schulz) returns home from Vietnam in the summer of 1969, only to learn that five people in his home town have been brutally murdered by a crazy, Charles Manson-like cult leader (Raimi). After reuniting with his dog Whiskey (Dandy) and his ex-girlfriend, Sally (Hansen), Stryker is visited by three fellow Nam veterans, including a lieutenant, Miller (Manfred) who feels guilty about his role in the battle that maimed Stryker. After Whiskey is killed and Sally is abducted by the cult followers, Stryker and his friends wage a war against the maniacal enemy.

COMMENTARY: 'Seventies movies like *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) are sometimes referred to as examples of the "savage cinema," over-the-top efforts of brutality, high intensity, blunt violence and extreme gore. These movies morphed into the slasher film in the 1980s, but there were still a few holdouts. One example of the savage cinema in the decade of Reagan, and one that reveals the diminishing returns the subgenre was achieving as it entered its second decade, is director Josh Becker's *Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except*. It's ragged, almost amateurish at the start but by the hair-raising, blood-curdling final battle, the film achieves a level of high energy and zeal that makes it difficult to dismiss.

The film begins with a depiction of Stryker serving in South Vietnam, and it's clearly Vietnam by way of some patch of woods in middle America. There's much stock footage to be seen in this sequence (ostensibly set in 1969), and it doesn't match the other footage. Even the sets aren't particularly convincing or well-shot. In a word, the acting by the leads is terrible. It's community theater-level bad. Some gory moments occur when Stryker's patrol must take a village held by Charlie, but the campaign looks like a cheapskate production put on by ambitious high school students.

But then, *Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except* settles down in America, and we're re-introduced to an older, wiser Stryker as he struggles to live

his life in peace and reconnect with the girl he left behind, Sally. Of course, that pursuit isn't quite as easy as it could be, given that a crazy cult is in town.

Evil Dead director Sam Raimi plays the cult leader in a ratty fright wig, and his insane performance manages to be both funny and terrifying, elevating the film's sense of menace. In one sequence, Raimi—his face scrunched up with delight—dips his hands into a bucket of blood and leaves crimson palm prints on Sally's sweater, over her breasts. All the while he discusses the “sacrificial fluids” and makes solemn declarations. “You must taste blood to be a man,” he suggests. He also thinks he's Jesus Christ, returned to Earth.

There is a series of brutal attacks (including one on Stryker's dog) before Stryker launches a counterattack. “There are times when the laws of God and man must be put aside,” he declares. So with his army buddies in tow, Stryker engages Raimi in battle, and the film descends into a non-stop bloody free for all. Scissors get lodged in eye sockets, characters fall on knives and suffer gushing shotgun wounds. Finally, even Raimi goes down, impaled on his crashed motorcycle. It's a violent and disgusting wrap-up. As much as you want to dismiss the movie, something about this denouement (replete with some crazy but effective tracking chase shots) plays on violent impulses that need to see justice meted out.

There are some funny jokes in *Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except* too. At one point, the van carrying the evil cultists is seen and it's decorated with slogans like “flower power” and “Love saves.” Odd sentiments for a group of hippies led by the wacko Raimi character, but there seems to be a message in here about how the free love and acceptance of the hippie generation went south in the early 1970s and gave rise to a new brand of insanity, spotlighted by the likes of Charles Manson. In typical 1980s fashion, the bad guys are put down by military men (support our troops) and good and evil is depicted in the starker terms of black and white. Just like in *Rambo*.

Warning Sign

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Eminently forgettable.”—Peter Dendle. *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, McFarland and Company, 2000, page 187.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sam Waterston (Cal Morse); Kathleen Quinlan (Joannie Morse); Yaphet Kotto (Major Ed Connolly); Jeffrey De Munn (Dan Fairchild); Richard Dysart (Nielsen); G.W. Bailey (Tom Schmidt); Jerry Hardin (Vic Flint); Rick Rossovich (Bob); Cynthia Cable (Dana); Scott Paul (Captain Wellston); Kavi Raz (Kipour); Keith Szarabajka (Tippett); Tom McFadden (Deputy); J. Patrick McNamara (Aide).

CREW: A Barwood/Robbins Production. *Casting:* Susan Arnold. *Executive Producer:* Matthew Robbins. *Music:* Craig Safan. *Film Editor:* Robert Lawrence. *Production Design:* Henry Bumstead. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Produced by:* Jim Bloom. *Written by:* Hal Barwood, Matthew Robbins. *Directed by:* Hal Barwood. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

P.O.V.

“I’m glad it wasn’t a good film cinematically. I think its impact will be minimal.”¹⁹—Cetus Corporation executive Michael Goldberg breathes a sigh of relief that his industry won’t bear the brunt of a popular “issue” film, *Warning Sign*.

SYNOPSIS: An accident in a Bio Tek experimental lab trips an alarm and a “Protocol One” scenario in the secret facility. Security officer Joannie Morse (Quinlan) seals off the laboratory as part of the containment procedure, but several scientists are contaminated by a deadly agent and have only an untested anti-toxin as an antidote.

Joannie attempts to manage the crisis while the local sheriff, her husband Cal (Waterston), recruits assistance from a former Bio Tek employee, Fairchild (De Munn), in hopes of rescuing the eighty-five scientist and employees trapped inside with a bug that has an 80 percent fatality rate.

Meanwhile, Federal forces under Major Ed Connolly (Kotto) arrive to take over the operation and maintain a blanket of secrecy around Bio Tek’s research. Inside, the scientists start to die ... only to revive shortly thereafter as homicidal maniacs, further endangering Joannie.

COMMENTARY: The essence of strong drama (and perhaps of effective horror too) rests in the heart of a character the audience can strongly identify with ... and one who’s on the spot. *Warning Sign* starts off strongly because it is terrifying and plausible in the manner that it charts a deadly pathogen’s spread through a sealed laboratory, and because it lands a compelling and interesting character, Kathleen

Quinlan's competent security guard, Joannie, in a position of authority she doesn't want.

At Bio Tek Laboratory, a latter day Pandora's Box, important men in protective suits scurry about their top-secret business, their sensitive skin a mere layer away from the deadly chemicals and compounds that they toil with every day. In a well-orchestrated scene that reveals how precarious this environmental balance really is, human error and coincidence are the culprits that kill.

In an almost comical, slapstick fashion, a series of events cause chaos. A label gets stuck on a shirt sleeve by accident, and then a vial of the deadly compound coheres to the sticky material, and, after a moment, the vial of death drops to the floor. The unnoticed beaker of death gets kicked around first, then is broken, releasing a deadly germ. Meanwhile, the self-congratulating scientists celebrate a breakthrough and, wishing to take a photo to commemorate the occasion, lift up their helmet visors. They're unaware that inhaling will lead to their own demises, but they know soon enough.

After this uncomfortably realistic scene, Joannie gets introduced. She is responsible for sealing the facility, closing the personnel in their labs and limiting the spread of the aerosol contamination. Competent and likable, Joannie goes by the book, taking each step in the correct order. Then—again—human nature enters the equation and poses a challenge.

A scientist trapped in one of the labs (G.W. Bailey) instructs her to release the staff and says that the contamination is actually a “non-event event.” Joannie’s superior, he starts to bully her, ordering her to return the lab status to normal.

At this point, *Warning Sign* has its audience precisely where it wants it. We've all been in a situation where we're asked to do something we know is wrong, but lives aren't usually at stake. Still, the employer-employee relationship here makes the sequence even more dynamic, as Joannie must decide where her priorities should lie, with the book—which establishes protocol, or with her boss, whom she reports to. It's a fascinating dilemma, and the opening moments of *Warning Sign* are consequently strong and involving.

Unfortunately, the film can't maintain this tone. *Warning Sign* provides a government conspiracy to secretly conduct germ warfare (*a la Impulse* [1984]), as well as a powerful central nemesis (fast-moving, rage-filled, tumor-faced zombie-like scientists, presaging *28 Days Later*

[2003]). But the tension bleeds out of the picture as the action moves away from Quinlan's character to Waterston's plight outside the plant. He's the town sheriff and he just happens to be a "germophobe," a real script contrivance. Worse, he must recruit a germ expert, and the script degenerates into macho banter.

This is a movie that wants to be *The China Syndrome* (1978), *Silkwood* (1983), or *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), but director Hal Barwood doesn't have the chops to pull it off. Even though the film looks terrific, courtesy of the incomparable cinematographer Dean Cundey, the pace flags, and the expected terror isn't generated but for a few isolated scenes. The film loses track of the resourceful Joannie, until she's a traditional damsel in distress waiting to be rescued by the men who go in and risk contamination to save her.

Warning Sign isn't a *bad* film, and clever touches abound (including a revelation about one character's contact lenses). But the film never lives up to its opening promise. A taut, involving scenario and a strong, Ripley-caliber female character suggest tremendous potential, and the attack sequences (some of which involve weapons) have the requisite zing. Yet the film's happy ending is pat, and the overall experience is that the movie drags. To use a movie analogy, imagine if this movie had been a biological *Die Hard* throughout, with a tough-as-nails Joannie navigating the crises inside the lab like John McClane, her husband only able to offer aid and assistance from the outside. That's the movie that *Warning Sign* should have been. And isn't.

1986

January 20: After legislation passed in 1983 (over the objections of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms and the early intransigence of Dick Cheney), Martin Luther King Day is celebrated as a national holiday on this date. It was celebrated for the first time across 50 states in 1993.

January 28: The space shuttle Challenger explodes on lift-off, an accident which kills the entire crew, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe. A nation mourns.

February 19: The Russian space station Mir is launched into orbit, where it will stay until the late 1990s.

April 14: America launches air strikes against terrorist sites in Libya. The real target: Qaddafi.

April 26: A nuclear meltdown occurs in the plant at the Ukrainian city of Chernobyl in the Soviet Union.

May 25: Five million Americans join hands to form a 4,000-mile unbroken chain of bodies in “Hands Across America,” a stunt designed to raise money to fight poverty, hunger and homelessness, which were all on the rise in America.

July 5: The Statue of Liberty is re-opened after undergoing 80 million dollars worth of repairs. The centennial of the dedication is celebrated in late October.

August 26: The “Preppie Killer,” Robert Chambers kills 18-year-old Jennifer Levin in Central Park, and the ensuing investigation and trial becomes a national obsession.

September 14: The “Just Say No Drugs” campaign is launched.

October 11: President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev attend another summit, this one in Reykjavik, Iceland, to discuss nuclear arms. As before, the summit concludes with no agreement.

November 14: Ivan Boesky is fined 100 million dollars and sent to prison for insider trading.

November 26: Feeling public pressure, President Reagan announces the formation of the Tower Commission to investigate the rapidly spreading scandal known as “Iran-Contra,” which involved the sale of weapons to Iran, and the profits from said sales going (illegally) to fund right-wing

rebels, the Contras, in Nicaragua.

Aliens



Critical Reception

“Let’s not mince words: *Aliens* is the greatest horror movie since *Frankenstein* ... Henceforth, when the titles of classic movies are given, there’s another name on the list.”—Scott Cain, “*Aliens* Is a New Classic,” *The Atlanta Journal/Atlanta Constitution*, July 18, 1986, page P/1.

“[It] represents a quintessential ’80s response: Send in the Marines. Director James Cameron eschewed the midnight nihilism of Scott’s original for a machine-tooled action film—one of the finest ever made, as it turned out—yet *Aliens* has a subterranean dread all its own.”—Ty Burr, “Space Ages,” *Entertainment Weekly*, November 20, 1992, page 94.

“...arguably the most terrifying film made in the last thirty years.”—Harlan Ellison, *Harlan Ellison’s Watching*, Underwood-Miller, 1989, page 314.

“[O]ne of the most intensely shocking films to open in ages: Even if you think you’ve got the stamina for cinematic suspense, you may find yourself out in the lobby, midway, catching your breath. This film is also the best movie of the year and the best picture of any kind to open so far this summer ... *Aliens* is the *Jaws* of the 1980s.”—Jay Boyar, “Creepy, Crawly *Aliens* is Best Horror Flick of ’86,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 27, 1986, page 24.

“The ultimate monster film, *Aliens* barrels along from chilling lows to high terror ... It is a funny movie because terror without the relief of laughter loses its power. You may have nightmares ... You may ride this roller coaster helplessly shrieking with terror or screaming with laughter. It will not leave you unmoved.”—Carole Kass, “*Aliens* Takes Emotions on Roller Coaster Ride,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 19, 1986, page B-8.

“Talk about relentless. There probably has never been a cliffhanger as outrageous or as ingeniously sustained as *Aliens* ... You walk out of this movie feeling pummeled...”—John Hartl, “*Aliens* Arrive in Nearly Plural-Perfect Condition,” *The Seattle Times*, July 18, 1986, page 20.

“[T]he final forty-five minutes of virtual non-stop action constitute one of the most horrific roller coaster rides seen on screen. You’ll wish it would hurry and end so you can catch your breath; but when it ends, you’ll wish it would start over...”—Philip Wuntch. “*Aliens Conquers the Sequel*—The more the scarier this time around,” *The Dallas Morning News*, July 18, 1986, page 1c.

“[T]he scariest movie of a lifetime.”—George Williams, “*Aliens* Will Frighten You Out of Your Skin,” *Sacramento Bee*, July 18, 1986, page SC5.

“Bill Paxton was fairly godlike in this film. Six alien costumes were made to look like dozens and James Cameron does what he does best—if a little is good, then a lot should be really good! As a product of its period, a kind of Rambo vs. monsters tale where America was trying to fight unwinnable battles (and let’s not forget that Mr. Cameron wrote *First Blood Part II* with Mr. Stallone), but couldn’t really win (only the family unit could do that!), *Aliens* has some slam-bang action sequences (Ripley rescuing the Marines over the protests of their feeble commander is well-done, and would probably look really cool with Danny Elfman’s music for *Batman* playing in the background), good performances from its cast (even a slimy Paul Reiser), and a sense of claustrophobia nicely developed in a much-larger playing field than Ridley Scott had in the first film. The evils of capitalism are a large player, but looked at as a mirror to Vietnam where the ‘enemy’ plays with no rules and is therefore unstoppable, and large greedy corporations are sending our heroes there in the first place, there’s something interesting to ponder. The ‘family will save you’ message was quite warm for a film of this type, and Ripley goes through a full character arc, which, as much as we love horror, is certainly a rarity. Too bad much of its resonance was cheapened with the very cynical set-up of the third film, basically destroying all that Ripley had fought to win in *Aliens* in the first five minutes. Still, kudos to Cameron and company—this is a sequel that took its central concept somewhere else, and we should be grateful. James Horner also provided some topnotch music, especially if you like his scores for *Star Trek* films, since he’s very fond of borrowing from his own library.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

“The real plot question, of course, is how long will it take for Sigourney to strip to her T-shirt. More of a bug hunt and not as scary as the original.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

CAST: Sigourney Weaver (Ripley); Michael Biehn (Corporal Hicks); Paul Reiser (Carter J. Burke); Lance Henriksen (Bishop); Carrie Henn (Newt/Rebecca Jorden); Bill Paxton (Pvt. Hudson); William Hope (Lt. Gorman); Rico Ross (Pvt. Frost); Al Matthews (Sgt. Apone); Jenette Goldstein (Pvt. Vasquez); Colette Miller (Corporal Ferror); Daniel Kash (Spunkmeyer); Cynthia Scott (Dietrich); Tip Tipping (Crowe); Trevor Steedman (Wierzbowski); Paul Maxwell (Van Leuwen); Alibe Parsons (Med Tech).

CREW: Brandywine Productions presents a James Cameron film. *Casting:* Jane Taylor (U.S.A), Mary Selway (U.K.). *Executive Producers:* Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill. *Music:* James Horner. *Alien Effects:* Stan Winston. *Certain Visual Special Effects by:* L.A. Effects Group, Inc., Robert and Dennis Skotak and Brian Johnson. *Production Designer:* Peter Lamont. *Director of Photography:* Adrian Biddle. *Film Editor:* Roy Lovejoy. *Story by:* James Cameron, David Giler, Walter Hill. *Based on characters created by:* Dan O'Bannon, Ronald Shusett. *Produced by:* Gale Ann Hurd. *Written and Directed by:* James Cameron. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time, theatrical version:* 137 minutes. *Running time, director's cut:* 154 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Fifty-seven years after she battled a deadly xenomorph aboard the *Nostromo*, Ellen Ripley (Weaver)—in suspended animation aboard a small shuttle—is rescued by a space salvage team. After a medical convalescence (with her companion, Jones the cat), Ripley returns to Earth and has her flight license revoked when officials don't believe her incredible tale of combating an alien aboard the *Nostromo*. But when Earth loses contact with the colony on LV-426, the distant world where Ripley's crew found the alien eggs, Company rep Carter Burke (Reiser) and Colonial Marine Lieutenant Gorman (Hope) recruit Ripley for a trip back to space to determine what has caused the communications blackout. Under the protection of a team of Marines that includes the cowardly private Hudson (Paxton), the strong but silent Corporal Hicks (Biehn), the tough-as-nails Vasquez (Goldstein) and a synthetic humanoid named Bishop (Henriksen), Ripley and Burke head to LV-426 aboard the *Sulaco*.

Once there, they drop to the surface and explore the colony, to find just one survivor, a young girl named Newt (Henn). The rest of the 110 colonists have been cocooned and taken to an alien hive underneath the primary heat exchangers of the terra-forming reactor. The Marines go in to save them, and are all but massacred by the aliens. The survivors attempt to barricade themselves inside the colony command post after their ship is destroyed in a second alien attack. But time grows short as the reactor threatens to explode, and

the aliens probe the complex for a way in.

Although Ripley has good reason to suspect Bishop, given her history with androids, the real menace in the group this time is Burke, a yuppie businessman who thinks the aliens would make a great specimen for the Company's bio-weapons division. In order to get some aliens home, he sets loose two alien face-huggers on Ripley and young Newt, but they survive. Before the desperate humans can decide what to do with Burke, the aliens break into the complex in force and there is a tremendous firefight that leaves only Hicks, Ripley, and Newt alive. During the fight, Ripley and Newt are separated, and Ripley must return to Sub Level 3, the alien hive, to rescue her before she can be impregnated by a face-hugger. Once there, Ripley does save Newt, but runs afoul of the Alien Queen!

COMMENTARY: The Hollywood war movie is translated to the final frontier lock, stock, barrel and M41A Pulse Rifle with Pump Action Grenade Launcher in James Cameron's amazing *Aliens*. Released after America's muscle-flexing spree in Grenada, during the age of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), which Cameron also penned, and the "New Patriotism," this substantial, thrilling effort lingers over man's military superiority and impressive fire power. Filled with tactical smart rifles, APCs, nukes, drop ships, flame throwers, knives and on and on, this sequel to Ridley Scott's "truckers in space" terror *Alien* seemingly glorifies mankind's obsession with the art of destruction.

Cleverly, however, Cameron has more on his mind than inter-species jingoism. His film subtly acknowledges that the mid-1980s was also the era of Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and therefore his space warfare movie is, like that contemporary, a Vietnam War metaphor. To wit: arrogant, proud Marines brimming with the best military hardware money can buy, move into "alien" territory (literally) where they underestimate their enemy—and all that glittering, impressive technology proves irrelevant. The alien xenomorph is the ultimate guerrilla warrior, the Viet Cong's "Charlie" re-imagined as silver-toothed monstrosities equipped with superior knowledge of the landscape (down to the last air duct). Their weapons are not guns, but those things associated with primitives: animal instincts.



Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) rescues space waif Newt (Carrie Henn) from the alien lair during the climactic battle in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986).

The Marines, characterized by Vasquez's shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later mantra "I only need to know one thing: where they are...," are dropped into foreign territory and immediately out-classed in battle. Importantly, these Marines find themselves hamstrung by an incompetent official's orders that they not employ their glorious

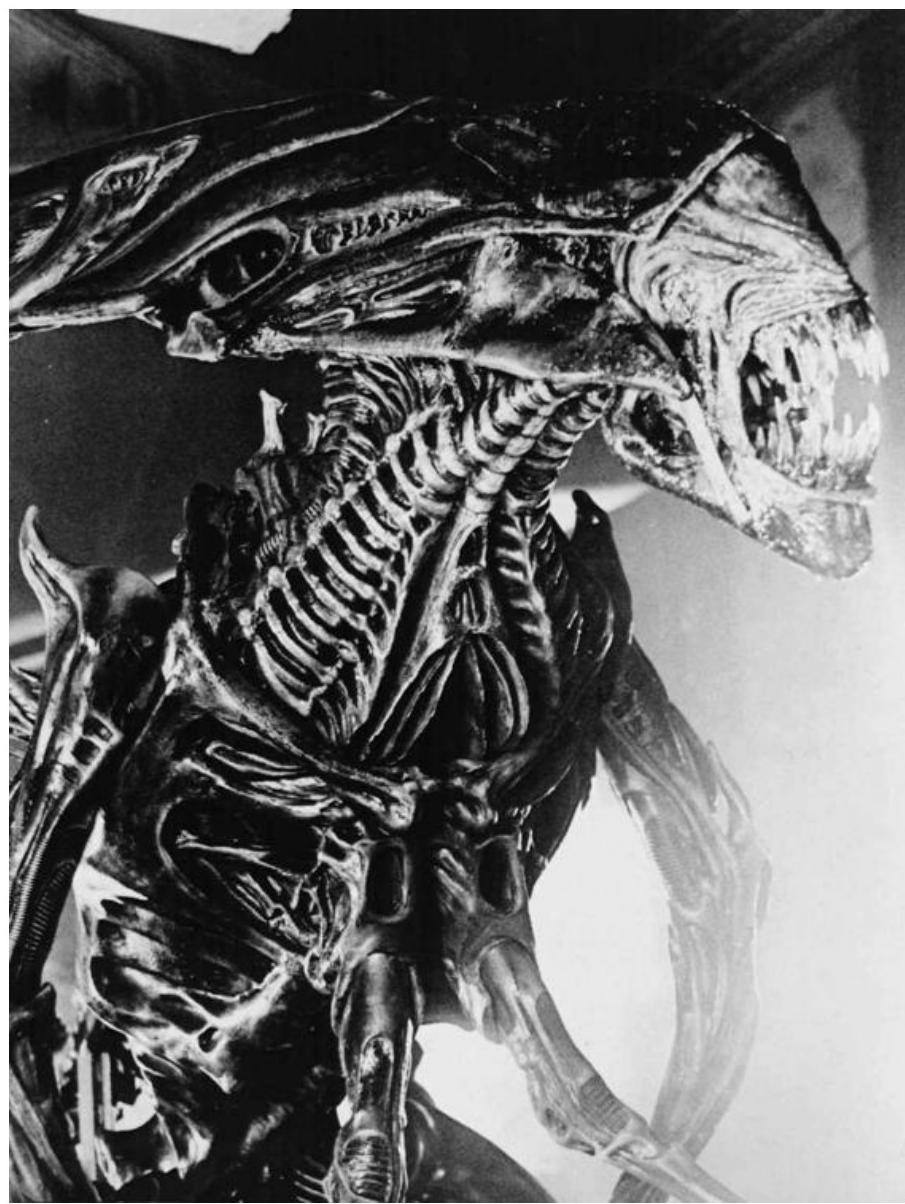
superior fire power in the first engagement because the aliens have strategically constructed their hive under a reactor's primary heat exchanger.

This misuse of American might relates to the commonly heard argument about the Vietnam conflict, that the generals and politicians ordered the superior American soldier (or “grunt”) to fight the war in half-measures, with one hand tied behind their backs, metaphorically speaking. So *Aliens* is both acknowledgment of failure in Vietnam and gung-ho propaganda that, had the Army been “allowed” to win, total victory would have been achieved. Ripley, again played by Sigourney Weaver, recommends nuking the entire colony from orbit “to be sure,” a “safe” deploying of a fearsome power, and it is this viewpoint that the movie deems reasonable, though business interests preclude dropping the bomb.

Cameron unveils an interesting film technique to dramatize the fog of war in the first battle between the aliens and the Marines in Sub-Level 3. In *Platoon*, director Stone depicts foot soldiers (grunts) fighting on a chaotic landscape with no sense of the enemy’s location, and no sense of direction. There are no borders or sides, it is all pure pandemonium. Cameron and *Aliens* achieve the same dramatic effect by revealing each soldier’s position and P.O.V., courteously rendered—again—from technology, in this case helmet-mounted cameras. On the monitors in the APC, the film reveals a dizzying array of personal views as monitors turn to static as aliens attack. Soldiers run by screens, confused-looking, and the blaze of gunfire is registered in whited-out imagery and quick glances. This decision to fragment the fight (and also to cut to soldier vital sign monitors … going flat) visually takes away the audience’s sense of who is where, and why. Thus the terror of camouflaged “guerilla” aliens who blend into the scenery (the hive) is established well, and further augments the film’s theme of technology undercut, misapplied on foreign soil by overconfident Americans.

If *Aliens* re-stages the dynamics of the Vietnam War on another world, it also clearly reflects the growing and worrisome domination of corporations in policy-making. The unseen (and unfeeling) Company of *Alien* is fully depicted in this sequel as a cutthroat hive of its own, a place of yuppie values amok, business suits and ties, and the primacy of financial concerns. *Aliens* also makes the connection that corporate interests in profit and exploiting new resources leads the policy-making apparatus of nation-states at the expense of humanity and even decency. Carter Burke, the film’s “space yuppie,” sends explorers out to find Ripley’s derelict ship (and alien eggs) without warning

them of the danger. Then, fully aware of the threat himself, Burke tries to make Ripley and young Newt secretly the host of the aliens so he can pass them through customs to the company's bio-weapons division and make a fortune. This is what the movie presents as the real crime, the real villainy: human avarice.



The Alien Queen, a creation of Stan Winston, attacks in *Aliens*.

By contrast, the aliens—so fearsome and so monstrous on the surface, and so parasitical in terms of their relationship with other species—stick together. A hive society means one for all and all for one. Humans (uber-capitalists like Burke, in particular) see their own wealth as the only ends worth achieving. “I don’t know which species is worse,” Ripley says, making the connection explicit. “You don’t see them fucking each other over for a goddamned percentage.”

Burke also forges decisions based on the good of his corporate overlords, not his “support” for the troops in battle. When nuking the colony is suggested, he complains. “This installation has a substantial dollar value attached to it,” as if the colony’s cost, not the death of one hundred families, or the protection of the grunts he is with, matters.

In 2006—with the Iraq conflict already in its fourth year—Americans detect more clearly than ever how business interests (like Halliburton’s) make war policy for nations in search of foreign business opportunities. *Aliens* made the case in 1986, exploring the matrix of big corporations and military might. The film also depicts a world where the poor have been relegated to tiny apartment cubicles (like Ripley’s shabby home on Earth) and corporate board rooms are the lap of luxury. The Reagan Revolution reigns supreme, even in the future.

Many of the characters may be described in terms of war movie clichés. There’s the green officer (Gorman) on his first command, the “short timer” and coward (Hudson), even the colorful drill sergeant (Apone) and the strong, silent type (Michael Biehn’s Hicks). Yet despite the familiarity of these types, the characters all register strongly as likable and distinctive individuals rather than mere alien fodder. Sigourney Weaver was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance here, and rightfully so. She re-establishes her character, Ripley, with greater dimensionality than before. Lance Henriksen, also skilled in his role of Bishop, doesn’t reveal the character’s allegiance too soon. *Alien* featured a murderous android, Ash, and Cameron and Henriksen play with audience expectations and knowledge regarding Bishop.

Perhaps *Aliens* is most famous in the twenty-first century for its battling mother figures. Ripley risks grave bodily harm and returns to Sub-Level 3 to save her “adopted” daughter, the waif Newt (and a substitute for her own daughter, who died while she was away in

space). Her effort lands Ripley in direct opposition with the Queen Alien, who protects an entire hive worth of offspring. The mothering instinct, *Aliens* reveals, is universal. Woman may be fragile compared to Alien Queen, but the drive is no less strong, and the clash of civilizations finally comes down to something as simple as protecting one's young. However, the script could have played more cleverly and less obviously with this dynamic. For instance, is it truly necessary to see Ripley unload all of her ammunition and flame-thrower fuel in an effort to destroy the Queen's egg chamber, when it is all going to be blown sky high in a nuclear explosion in just moments? This scene establishes Ripley's rage, and gives the Alien Queen motive for revenge, but is nonetheless overkill. Ripley should be too smart to let useless, stupid rage get the better of her.

Aliens is one of the finest, most cleverly achieved horror movies of the 1980s, both exhilarating and awe-inspiring. It is breathless to the max, yet so much of its success is built on plausibility. From space to sky to road to infantry, every facet of this doomed mission to LV-426 is brilliantly plausible and expertly dramatized with amazing sets, miniatures, mattes and full scale vehicles. Scenes that would prove a climax in another film—a drop from space, for instance—are but one of a dozen such details here. *Aliens* also fascinates because it stokes the mid-1980s trend of militarizing horror films along with other examples such as *Predator* (1987) and *Phantasm 2* (1988). On first blush, this seems like a propagandistic “send in the Marines” attitude or two-dimensional reliance on guns over intelligence, but in some films, including Cameron's *Aliens*, American military might isn't merely depicted, it is actively questioned. Even in the confident age of Reagan, the ghost of Vietnam continues to cast a long shadow over Hollywood cinematic efforts.

LEGACY: *Aliens* proved a mega-hit in the summer of 1986. Crafting a sequel to such a splendid film proved more difficult; David Fincher's controversial *Alien 3*—which featured no guns and no weapons or technology of any kind—bowed to fan derision in 1992. Another sequel, the cartoony *Alien Resurrection* battled *Starship Troopers* in theaters in the autumn of 1997. In 2004, *Alien vs. Predator* saw the Alien and Predator (and Lance Henriksen!) duke it out in Antarctica.

April Fool's Day



“Surprisingly well-photographed genre stinker that is as mindless as it is stupid. The film is an exhausting eighty-eight minute whodunit that winds up being a hoax, and is ultimately as plastic and flaccid as the 1980s itself. Simply described—a witless collision of *Friday the 13th* and *The Breakfast Club*.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jay Barker (Harve); Deborah Foreman (Muffy/Buffy); Deborah Goodrich (Nikki); Ken Olandt (Rob); Griffin O’Neal (Skip); Leon King Pinsent (Nan); Clayton Rohner (Chaz); Amy Steel (Kit); Thomas F. Wilson (Arch); Pat Barlow (Clara); Lloyd Berry (Ferryman); Tom Heaton (Constable Potter/Uncle Frank); Mike Nomad (Buck).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Hometown Film Production. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Music:* Charles Bernstein. *Film Editor:* Bruce Green. *Art Director:* Stewart Campbell. *Director of Photography:* Charles Minsky. *Written by:* Danilo Bach. *Producer:* Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Martin Becker. *Stunt Coordinator:* John Wardlow. *Special Effects Makeup Effects:* Reel EFX, Inc., Martin Becker, Christopher Swift, Jim Gill, Bettie Kaufman. *Directed by:* Fred Walton. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of college buddies get together on an island on April Fool’s Day to celebrate the approaching birthday of their rich friend, Muffy. On her twenty-first birthday, Muffy will inherit a fortune from her industrialist father, but she acts strangely throughout the weekend. Almost immediately, accidents and strange incidents (like a ferry worker getting crushed between the boat and the dock) mar the celebration. Making matters worse, Muffy is a prankster, vexing her friends with whoopee cushions, leaky champagne glasses and exploding cigars.

The jokes soon get cruel and the celebrants start to disappear. Resourceful Kit and her boyfriend Rob learn that Muffy may have a twin sister, one who has spent a great deal of time in a mental institute.

COMMENTARY: Given the fact that there are horror movies set on Halloween, Christmas, New Year’s Eve, Valentine’s Day, Prom Night, and Bloody Birthdays, it was no doubt merely a matter of time until somebody created a slasher film set on April Fool’s Day.

Nothing is what it seems on this day, and jokes are played throughout

the film. In fact, there are *no murders* in the film at all ... it's all a big fat hoax. In a sense, this should earn the film some kudos since its form (a hoax) clearly mirrors its content. Yet this is one occasion where that achievement doesn't seem all that terrific. There are other films in this hoax genre, the best probably David Fincher's *The Game* (1997).

April Fool's Day fails to reach that apex because the filmmakers want to have their cake and eat it too. To wit, the film wants to look and feel like the average slasher film (replete with characters drawn totally in stereotypes), but then at the end the movie wants to explain that everything was just a gag, which requires logical, practicality and narrative sense. Simply stated, none of the "horrific" events in this film could possibly be explained away as probable, or even plausible.

Slasher films are, almost by definition, anti-rational. They feature killers who can't be killed; often are set on dark and stormy nights, and require teenagers to behave rather stupidly. The killers in these films are always in the right place at the right time to kill the most vulnerable person.

Slasher films are great; they're fun, but they are not realistic. So when *April Fool's Day* attempts in its coda to explain all the preceding disappearances and "deaths" in a rational fashion—as a practical joke, a rehearsal for a "Whodunit Weekend," the film totally and utterly deflates.

For instance, while watching the film, ask yourself when each character is let in on the joke. Each "reveal" must occur one-on-one, at lightning-fast efficiency, and each "punk'd" character must then agree to be a part of the ongoing con and agreeably disappear for its duration. An example where this would be difficult is Chaz's off-screen death scene. His penis is apparently cut off in the seconds that Nikki is out of the room. How'd that happen?

The movie assumes that the prankster and the punk'd could get together at precisely the right time—spend exactly enough time together to explain the joke—and not be discovered. The movie also assumes that every single person punk'd would agree to the terms of the game, and given the fact that it's a bit cruel (at one point, characters torment a girl about a secret abortion in her past) ... it's unlikely that people would sign on without questions or concerns. It only takes one slip-up and the whole game is ruined.

More to the point, let's imagine you've been working hard at school

for months, want to blow off steam and go away to an isolated island with your friends for a vacation ... and suddenly you're in this game. How much fun would it be for you to be in hiding for four days while the other "victims" figure out the prank? What if you "die" first? How do you like spending your vacation in the basement? It's not even as though the "murdered" characters can watch the practical jokes unfolding. No, the illusion must be maintained.

The whole basis of this "murder game" in *April Fool's Day* is—in keeping with the slasher formula—a transgression or crime in the past. The killer knows things about each character, like the fact that Nan had an abortion or Harve was in a car accident. How would this translate to a Whodunit Weekend with guests who are strangers? The movie doesn't even have the courage to stay true to its own explanation. It just doesn't make any sense. And also, raise your hand if you believe Muffy can keep up odd behaviors for a long weekend even when you think you're alone and hence unobserved? Muffy's one hell of a method actor, I guess (which is no doubt why she wants to take all that talent and put it to use, running the equivalent of a bed and breakfast theme park).

April Fool's Day might have held together through its ludicrous premise if every character weren't such a familiar cliché. There's the smart girl (Nan), the econ major-yuppie (Harve), the videographer (Chaz), the poor kid (Rob), etc. It's the umpteenth repetition of these characters, but remember they're supposed to be real not just slasher fodder.

Finally, *April Fool's Day*'s big reveal is the ultimate example of 1980s "Me Generation" thinking. Muffy has spent all weekend tormenting her friends and she basically explains it by saying (and I'm paraphrasing wildly here) "Sorry for all the rotten things I did to you guys—like the abortion thingie—but it was all for me." Then everybody drinks champagne and parties.

"Here we are, privileged, independent, the hope for the future," one character celebrates his shallow, easily conned peer group in *April Fool's Day*, the ones who—all for a laugh—will turn on each other in a heartbeat.

God forbid if he's right...

Cassandra

Cast and Crew

CAST: Shane Briant (Stephen); Briony Behets (Helen); Kit Taylor (Harrison); Lee James (Robert/Warren); Susan Barling (Libby); Tim Burns (Graham); Tessa Humphries (Cassandra/Jill); Natalie McCurry (Sally); Tegan Charles (Cassandra as a Child); Dylan O'Neill (Warren as a Child); Jeff Watson (Bob); Gary Traill (Mr. Stone); Jeff Truman (Devlin).

CREW: *Presented by:* Parrallel [sic] Films. *Screenplay:* Colin Eggleston, John Roane, Chris Fitchett. *Director of Photography:* Garry Wapshott. *Production Designer:* Stewart Burnside. *Film Editor:* Josephine Cook. *Music:* Trevor Lucas, Ian Mason. *Executive Producers:* Phil Gerlach, Mikael Borglund. *Associate Producer:* Steve Amezdroz. *Produced by:* Trevor Lucas. *Directed by:* Colin Eggleston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman named Cassandra (Humphries) experiences recurring nightmares involving an old family house, a woman's shotgun suicide, and a strange little boy who urges on the bloody act. Her father Stephen (Briant)—who has a pregnant mistress, Libby (Barling)—seems to be hiding something about the past, particularly the death of an aunt named Jill.

Cassandra soon experiences a dream about the murder of Libby—and it proves true! At the murder scene, scrawled in blood on the wall is the inquiry “Who Killed Cock Robin?” Police detective Harrison (Taylor) investigates the case and learns that Cassandra’s family has many dark secrets. For one thing, the late Aunt Jill was actually Cassandra’s mother. Helen (Behets), the woman she has believed to be her mother, is actually Stephen’s sister, her aunt! But worse than these discoveries is the knowledge that Jill and Stephen also had a son—Cassandra’s brother. His name is Warren, he is now an adult (after being put in an orphanage years ago) and may be quite homicidal. The answer to the riddle “Who Killed Cock Robin?” will free Cassandra from years of lies and half-buried memories.

COMMENTARY: *Cassandra* is a classy, modest little thriller, a notch or two above average. It adopts the familiar slasher paradigm as its model, though the characters here are a little more carefully delineated than in many slasher films. The only drawback to Colin Eggleston’s piece is the film’s pace, which tends to be slow.

A transgression (a sister-brother relationship; a suicide) “births” the

killer in *Cassandra*, and the audience doesn't know who it is, only that Cassandra had a brother named Warren. The movie gains significant traction from misdirection and red herrings. Who is really Warren? Is it Graham? Sgt. Harrison (the useless authority figure)? A bartender friend named Robbie? Someone else? Cassandra, as her name suggests, is the film's lead and final girl, and she ultimately must be the one to convince the others of what she learns, in this case, the sins of her father, and the fruit of that sin ... a serial killer.

Since *Cassandra* concerns secrets unearthed, it's appropriate that the film commences with images of old photographs being burned in a fire—the past being destroyed. It's a clever note on which to begin. Eggleston also proves adept at all the requisite stalk-and-slash aspects of the film. There's one sequence in which Helen gazes into the mirrors and sees the killer approaching her from behind. She turns around and stabs him at exactly the right instant; the set-up and execution of the scene is tense.

Eggleston occasionally relies on clichéd 1980s shots like the stay awake (someone waking up with a start), the P.O.V. stalk shot and the backwards walk, but these hackneyed touches tend not to detract from the better scenes. For instance, there's one thoroughly creepy sequence in which Cass's adulterous dad sidles up in bed naked to his girlfriend. He doesn't realize it, but she's a corpse.

Cassandra is a relatively obscure film today, and that obscurity may be a result of the fact that it feels like less than the sum of its parts. The movie never really ramps up into overdrive, and the pace never accelerates to the momentum a film like this requires during the final chase or in the *coup de grâce* (here, a decapitation with a shovel). *Cassandra* is better than the norm, but not by much.

Crawlspace

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Klaus Kinski (Karl Gunther); Talia Balsam (Lori Bancroft); Barbara Whinnery (Harriet Watkins); Carol Francis (Jessica Marlow); Tane (Sophie Fisher); Sally Brown (Martha White); Jack Heiler (Alfred Lassiter); David Abbott (Hank Storm); Kenneth Robert Shippy (Josef Steiner).

CREW: Empire Pictures Presents A Charles Band Production, a David

Schmoeller Film. *Casting Director*: Anthony Barnes. *Special Makeup Effects*: John Buechler, MMI, Inc. *Production Design*: Giovanni Natalucci. *Assistant Director*: Gianni Cozzo. *Associate Producer*: Ron Underwood. *Film Editor*: Bert Glatstein. *Music*: Pino Donaggio. *Orchestra Conducted by*: Natale Massara. *Director of Photography*: Sergio Salvati. *Executive Producer*: Charles Band. *Produced by*: Roberto Bessi. *Written and Directed by*: David Schmoeller. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 78 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Karl Gunther (Kinski) is a physician and Nazi who is “addicted to death” and keeps a mute woman (sans tongue) inside a cage in his apartment. He is also the landlord of his apartment building, and spends most of his time spying on his female renters through vantage points in a complex network of crawlspaces. Gunther occasionally sends rats into the apartments of the women he finds attractive, while also toiling on sadistic torture devices, then graduates to bloody murder. One new lodger, Lori Bancroft (Balsam), proves to be his match, and gives him a merry chase through the crawlspace.

COMMENTARY: Dr. Gunther (Klaus Kinski) is a man who keeps waiting to be judged for his horrible crimes, and—unfortunately—finds that his universe is one seemingly *without* judgment. Periodically, he submits to the whims of the universe, engaging in Russian roulette. If he eats the bullet, his crimes are finished and he’s been punished with the ultimate sentence: death. If he survives, Gunther declares “So be it” and takes his continued existence as a sanctioning of his illicit and inhumane actions.

Welcome to the world of *Crawlspace*, a mercifully brief (78 minutes) but nonetheless eternal-seeming voyage into the world of an unappealing psychopath.

Crawlspace is filmed like an episode of a cheap syndicated TV series. It features no exterior shots for the first thirty minutes, and is set entirely in one locale: an undistinguished apartment building.

Perhaps the director, David Schmoeller, was going for a sense of claustrophobia by limiting himself to this single setting. Or perhaps the twists and turns of this unusual building are meant to symbolize the dead ends and blind alleys of Gunther’s twisted psychology. But instead of feeling inspired, *Crawlspace* plays like an R-rated episode of *Three’s Company* gone horribly wrong, with Gunther as a deranged Mr. Roper.

As the movie reveals, Gunther found his father’s diary in 1971 and

learned that Daddy was a Nazi scientist who used the word “euthanasia” to describe his atrocities and the murder of Jews. Now, Gunther occasionally adorns lipstick and eyeshadow and watches Nazi home movies in his apartment, ostensibly to be closer to his deceased Papa.

“Heil Gunther” the madman declares. Clearly, Gunther needs to get out more.

Credit crazy old Gunther, however, with ingenuity. He keeps women captive in his apartment, and rigs Rube Goldberg-style torture devices for them, including a vise-grip over the lips for the mousy ones. Gunther’s *coup de grâce* is a chair rigged to deliver a metal spear up the anus of any unsuspecting sitter.

After this interminable movie—which involves a lot of back-and-forth through an implausibly oversized crawlspace, and the ridiculous specter of Kinski pursuing women belly-down on an outfitted luge-like scooter—you’ll feel like putting *Crawlspace*’s director in that chair and giving him the spear yourself.

Critters

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dee Wallace Stone (Mrs. Helen Brown); M. Emmet Walsh (Sheriff Harve); Billy Green Bush (Jay Brown); Scott Grimes (Brad Brown); Nadine Van Der Vilde (April Brown); Don Opper (Charlie McFadden); Lin Shaye (Sally); Billy Zane (Steven Elliot); Ethan Phillips (Jeff Barnes); Terence Mann (Johnny Steele); Michael Lee Gogin (Warden Zanti).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents in association with Smart Egg Pictures, a Sho film production. *Casting:* Elizabeth Leustig. *Director of Photography:* Tim Suhrstadt. *Film Editor:* Larry Bock. *Special Critter Effects:* Chiodo Brothers Productions, Charlie and Steve Chiodo. *Transformation and Zanti Makeup:* Christopher Biggs. *Miniature Effects:* Fantasy II Film Effects, Gene Warren. *Music:* David Newman. “Power of the Night” written by: Terrence Mann, Richie Vetter, performed by: Terrence Mann. *Associate Producer:* Sara Risher. *Story and Screenplay by:* Domonic Muir. *Executive Producer:* Robert Shaye. *Produced by:* Rupert Harvey. *Stunt Coordinator:* Mike Cassidy. *Directed by:* Stephen Herek. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The most dangerous criminals in the known galaxy, creatures known as Crites, escape from a Prison Asteroid in Sector 17 during a personnel transfer. Warden Zanti sends two highly destructive shape-shifting bounty hunters in pursuit, as the Crites head to Earth. The aliens arrive in Kansas and these “critters” immediately begin their favorite activity: eating, beginning with the Brown family’s farm livestock.

Critters next kill April’s (Der Vilde) boyfriend and bite and paralyze Mr. Brown (Bush). Young Scott (Brown) and his friend Charlie (Opper), the town loser, set about to stop the malevolent extraterrestrial fur balls with the help of a disbelieving Sheriff Harve (Walsh). Meanwhile, one of the bounty hunters assumes the appearance of rock star Johnny Steele (Mann) in order to destroy the critters.

COMMENTARY: *Critters* is either *Gremlins* (1984) redux or the unholy love child of *E.T.* (1982) and *Cujo* (1983). Come to think of it, the star of both latter films, Dee Wallace, stars here. She fights a pitched battle on the family farm against menacing, furry extra-terrestrials criminals in what amounts to an enjoyable romp.

A low-budget showcase for impressive mechanical effects (courtesy of the Chiodos), *Critters* sees Warden Zanti (named after an episode of *The Outer Limits* [1962–64] called “The Zanti Misfits”) dispatching two shape-shifting bounty hunters to Earth to retrieve a batch of evil Crites. The film’s biggest joke is that the heavily armed bounty hunters do as much damage to Grover’s Bend, Kansas, as to the Critters. These cosmic bounty hunters apparently subscribe to the Vietnam War axiom “to save a village, you must destroy it.”

An action-horror flick with suitably impressive pyrotechnics and a sense of its own silliness, *Critters* boasts some good film style, including P.O.V. racing shots as the Critters tumble down hallways and attack a hapless American family. *Critters* also features a quirky sense of humor. For instance, the menacing bounty hunters squeeze uncomfortably into the car alongside the uncertain sheriff, sharing the front seat with him. Apparently they don’t understand private space.

Another little joke (and one that comes at the expense of small mid-western towns) sees the locals recognize the town drunk and the reverend, but not the world-wide rock ‘n’ roll star.

The critters get in some good gags themselves as they wreak havoc, eating fish out of an aquarium in one instance. They also put out fires

on their backsides by jumping into a toilet. Why, those nasty little buggers even eat the stuffing out of a plush E.T. doll. Take that, Steven Spielberg.

My favorite moments are those in which the Critters speak in their strange alien language, and the film thoughtfully provides subtitles for their deep thoughts. Subtitles like the exclamation “Fuck!” or the “They have weapons!” This is highly amusing stuff in a deeply silly way. The family drama is kept to a minimum of sappiness.

Deadly Friend

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“...a disappointment.”—Patrick Goldstein, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1986.

“Wes Craven wanders through a straightforward story and throws Wes Craven elements into it and it seems like a film made by two directors, and the typical Wes Craven hurts the film. He seemed to be maturing as a storyteller with this film, but couldn’t resist the urge (or did someone make him do it?) to have basketballs exploding in faces and other assorted nonsense. Too bad, this film had interesting moments, but what hurts it is the heavy-handed attempt to make it more a horror film.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Matthew Laborteaux (Paul Conway); Kristy Swanson (Samantha); Michael Sharrett (Tom); Ann Twomey (Jeannie Conway); Anne Ramsey (Elvira Parker); Richard Marcus (Harry); Russ Marin (Dr. Johanson); Lee Paul (Police Sgt. Volchek); Andrew Roperto (Carl Denton); Charles Fleischer (Voice of “BB”); Robin Nuyen (Thief); Frank Carestant (Angry Resident); Merritt Olsen (CAT Scan Technician); William H. Faeth (Doctor in Sam’s Room); Joel Hile (Deputy); Tom Spratley (Neighbor); Jim Ishida (Coroner).

CREW: A Warner Brothers Release of a Pan Arts/Layton Film, a Wes Craven film. *Film Editor:* John P. Morrissey. *Music:* Charles Bernstein. *Film Editor:* Michael Eliot. *Production Designer:* Daniel Lomino. *Director of Photography:* Philip Lathrop. *Based on the novel “Friend” by:* Diana Henstell. *Co-Producer:* Robert L. Crawford. *Executive Producer:* Patrick

Kelly. Producer: Robert M. Sherman. Screenplay by: Bruce Joel Rubin. Directed by: Wes Craven. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Teenage genius Paul Conway (Laborteaux) has built a fantastically advanced robot named BB and with his mother (Twomey) moves into a new neighborhood. Paul befriends a boy named Tom (Sharrett) and falls in love with a local girl named Samantha (Swanson), who lives with an abusive, drunk father. At Halloween Samantha, Tom and Paul play tricks on the local curmudgeon, Elvira Parker (Ramsey). But things turn sour when Parker destroys BB with a shotgun. Later that night, Samantha's father abuses her again.

Later, the Conways get a call reporting that Samantha fell down her stairs and is in the hospital, brain dead and on life support. Paul uses the same type of microchip that powered the late BB to bring her back to life, but she is a murderous automaton with a mind of her own. Before long, she wreaks revenge on Elvira and her murderous father. Devastated by the loss of Samantha's love, Paul—a teenaged Frankenstein—realizes he must pull the plug before more people get hurt.

COMMENTARY: An inoffensive collection of 1980s teen clichés, *Deadly Friend* is a hodgepodge that bears all the tell-tale marks of post-production studio interference. Director Wes Craven strikes some different notes than are customary in his aggressive, visceral canon, but *Deadly Friend* finds its voice best in those scenes concerning the director's favorite topics: dysfunctional families and society's failed institutions.

Dramatically lessening its potential impact on audiences, *Deadly Friend* is packed with stock situations and characters. Typical of the time period when it was produced, the lead protagonist is a brilliant adolescent (*War Games* [1983], *Real Genius* [1985], and *Whiz Kids* [1984] on TV) who owns a cute robot capable of more humanity than he seems programmed for (*Short Circuit* [1986], *SpaceCamp* [1986], Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* [1987–94]). This teenager is frequently harassed by over-the-top bullies (*Back to the Future* [1985], *Weird Science* [1985], *Lady in White* [1988]) but the nasty teens eventually get their comeuppance.

In *Deadly Friend*, there is also the “evil” next-door neighbor (Anne Ramsey's Elvira Parker), who lives in a fortress-like home, not unlike Polly Holliday's character in *Gremlins* (1984). This nasty neighbor—an older single female in both pictures—is punished for her transgressions by the “monster” of each production.

Another common element is the other main character, a beautiful “fantasy” teenage girl with whom the teenage character discovers love. This character was played by Phoebe Cates in *Gremlins*, Ally Sheedy in *War Games*, Michelle Meyrink in *Real Genius*, Elisabeth Shue in the various *Back to the Future* films, Danielle von Zerneck in *My Science Project*, and finally, Kristy Swanson in *Deadly Friend*. Typical in these movies as well: The first kiss plays an important part in the narrative.

Even the Frankenstein aspect of *Deadly Friend* is reminiscent of kindred teen dramas. Like the mechanical central character in *D.A.R.Y.L.* (1985), *Deadly Friend*'s robot, BB, develops human feelings and personality.

Unfortunately, Craven's very involvement hinders *Deadly Friend* from being just another pleasing variation on the teenage genius-cute robot films of the epoch. Preview audiences expected a hardcore horror movie like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and were disappointed by the innocuous *Deadly Friend*. Demanding that Craven deliver the goods, Warner Bros. reportedly demanded the inclusion of several gore sequences, and the result is a schizophrenic film.

The biggest rap against *Deadly Friend* is that the gore sequences seem spliced in randomly from a different movie, muddying what is essentially a gentle and fun cinematic environment. Though it's interesting to see further evidence of Craven's ability to artfully define a rubber reality world, the dream sequences do not fit into the plot as expertly as they did in the seminal *Nightmare on Elm Street*. For instance, the final jolt is effectively shot, but in concept utterly ridiculous, featuring the robot BB pushing his way out of Samantha's corpse. This development is plainly nonsensical. How did the robot get there? How did he grow inside her? If it's a dream, where's the “stay awake” shot afterwards?

Deadly Friend is a mediocre film, and yet it doesn't lack merit in spots. Bruce Joel Rubin's screenplay is fun, and his clever dialogue is well-delivered by the three primary leads, young actors Kristy Swanson, Matthew Laborteaux and Michael Sharrett. Also, it's enjoyable to see how this film echoes Frankenstein lore, with Paul attempting to beat mortality, much like Mary Shelley's protagonist. In the end, Paul—like Victor before him—sees his entire life consumed with death when what he wanted was to vanquish it completely.

Despite this, the avid Craven student will find plenty of the auteur's trademarks here, specifically his concentration on the middle-class

family and a dysfunctional community that has failed its teens. Sam's father is not only overbearing, but abusive. He punches the lovely teen in the face and throws her down the stairs. He is a murderer, and another one of Craven's prototypical bad fathers. An alcoholic like Marge in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, this addiction is forcefully handled in *Deadly Friend*. The boozer is repaid for his transgression, lured to his demise by the tantalizing appearance of a bottle of alcohol.

It's interesting to note as well that nobody in Samantha's communities lifts a finger to protect her from the menace inside her own home. At one point, Mrs. Conway suggests action to prevent the abuse, and Samantha is offended, but the fact here is that Samantha dies because nobody comes to her aid. Mrs. Conway prays for Samantha ("May God keep Sam's father dead to the world for the rest of the night") but this strategy is hardly an effective one. In fact, that very night, Samantha is killed. Similarly, the institutions of law and order share a measure of blame for Samantha's death. The police in the movie are depicted as a bunch of buffoons. The sheriff sits on his ass and wolfs down a hoagie, assuring a deputy he will investigate a possible crime "as soon as humanly possible." Meanwhile, he keeps eating.

Finally, science fails Samantha. The hospital doctors who operate on her can't save her and are reduced to declaring, sadly, "Gee, she was a beautiful kid." Paul fails too, but at least he *tries* to save Samantha. It's not his fault that technology does not match his ambition.

This review indicates how much is happening in *Deadly Friend*. There's an attempt to re-vamp the *Frankenstein* story for modern audiences. There's a blatant effort to appeal to the teenagers who were attending movies like *Deadly Friend* in the 1980s. And finally, there's Craven's dark intellect at work, obsessing on dysfunctional families, abuse and the failure of our civilization to save a girl's life. Perhaps all three notions could have gelled into an outstanding feature, but *Deadly Friend* isn't that movie.

Demons 2

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Knight (George); Nancy Brilli (Hannah); Coralina Cataldi Tassoni (Sally); Bobby Rhodes (Hank); Asia Argento (Ingrid); Virginia

Bryan (Mary the Prostitute); Anita Bartolucci (Woman with Dog); Antonio Cantafora (Ingrid's Father); Luisa Passegas (Mother); David Marotta (Child Demon); Marco Vivio (Tommy); Michele Mirabella (Client).

CREW: Dario Argento presents a Lamberto Bava film. *Casting:* Roberto Palmerini. *Written by:* Dario Argento, Lamberto Bava, Franco Ferrini, Dardano Sacchetti. *Music:* Simon Boswell, The Smiths, The Cult, Art of Noise, Peter Murphy, Dead Can Dance. *Director of Photography:* Gianlorenzo Battaglia. *Art Director:* Davide Bassan. *Costume Designer:* Nicola Trussardi. *Film Editor:* Pietro Bozza. *Supervising Film Editor:* Franco Fraticelli. *Mechanical Creations and Transformations:* Sergio Stivaletti. *Special Makeup Effects:* Rosario Prestopino. *Production Manager:* Guido De Laurentiis. *Executive Producer:* Ferdinando Capato. *Producer:* Dario Argento. *Directed by:* Lamberto Bava. *MPAA Rating:* No rating. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The denizens of a gleaming apartment building in Italy go about their lives—working out in the gymnasium, studying for exams, even celebrating for a birthday. But on television, a movie about a “demon apocalypse” plays. One demon in the movie casts his murderous glance upon the birthday girl, Sally (Tassoni), and then emerges from the TV into reality to wreak terror on the entire building. Sally becomes infected by the demon disease, a contagion she spreads by touch (and by spittle) to her fellow party-goers.

The demon plague expands through the apartment building, infecting a scared and lonely little boy, Tommy (Vivio). A pregnant woman, Hannah (Brilli) and her studious husband, George (Knight) escape with the evil and demonic Sally in close pursuit. They rappel from the building’s roof down to the street and flee to an abandoned TV studio next door.

COMMENTARY: Like its slightly superior predecessor, *Demons 2* forecasts twenty-first century Japanese horror films, particularly the *Ring* series. In both *Demons 2* and the Americanized *The Ring* (2002), for instance, the suggestion that a mass medium (television) can broadcast real terror to the masses is posited. *Demons 2* even includes a scene of a demon emerging from a TV set, forecasting Samara’s scariest trick. What you see, happening far away, *can hurt you*.

Demons 2 proceeds on two simultaneous narrative tracks. In one, the denizens of the apartment building carry on with their work-a-day lives. Among the characters are a pregnant woman, a weightlifter, a child left at home for the evening with the TV as his babysitter, and a

young adult, Sally, anticipating her birthday party. This kitchen sink reality is contrasted with the film's second, alternative track. A scary horror movie is airing on television, a sequel of sorts to the horror movie that played in the doomed theater during Lamberto Bava's *Demons*. In this movie-within-a-movie, a group of teens desire to go behind the imposing wall separating their post-apocalypse domain from the dangerous demon domain. They climb over the wall, go inside "The Forbidden Zone" and find a demon claw in the mud. From there, the horror beings, since it only takes a scratch to get the demon life cycle back in motion. "The winds of death will sweep across the world and whole continents will be cast adrift into an ocean of blood," the film warns.

Sure enough, the demons burst forth into both narrative tracks, as they did in the original. They attack on the television, and they simultaneously attack in the apartment, revealing the movie's post-modern reflexive twist. Television serves not just as a babysitter in the film, but a bridge between realities. Thus what happens on television impacts reality. Somewhere in all this there is a message about the mass media's ability to foster panic, excitement, terror and other emotions through its reporting of events. An evil broadcast is an evil left to hang in the ether, an evil transmitted to millions in a "global" network.

The theme that television is a portal for evil is *Demons II*'s best notion, and the remainder of the gory film involves the typical siege-type story we've seen in movies like this since *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, with demons running rampant through the building. This material was handled as successfully, if not more so, in *Demons*. Still, this film mixes things up a bit (even while featuring much of the same cast). It offers the presence of a really frightening child demon, one who menaces a helpless pregnant woman while her husband is out. One tiny scratch and both she and the baby are done for, so *Demons 2* squeezes some legitimate mileage out of its horrific scenario. The idea of a transmittable disease, fostered by touch, generates real terror.

Demons 2's most novel development of the TV-centric world, however, gets saved for last. George and Hannah, the final two survivors, escape to a TV production studio where—*naturally*—television cameras are everywhere. Now it is *their* turn to broadcast suffering to the masses, and—perhaps—even commence another demon revolution. There are multiple shots of the survivors seeing themselves on screens in the studio, and then Sally, the ad-hoc leader of the demons, approaches for one last attack. The film climaxes with a novel idea about how to kill this demon, and it's a treat worth savoring in a pretty good

variation on the *Demons* theme.

Demons 2 is better than some contemporary Italian horrors, including the follow-up, unofficially *Demons 3* (also known as *The Church* [1989]). At least here, the rules of the first film are adhered to and re-established with success. Although the idea of demons popping out of movies and TV programs is decidedly odd, the *Demons* films are more exciting and more coherent than several of the 1980s spaghetti horrors. They also seem to have a point, one about the narrow divide between entertainment and reality, film and life, so that's refreshing too. Look past the gory deaths and see movies that ponder the wisdom of instantaneous transmission of suffering and pain worldwide.

Dream Lover

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kristy McNichol (Kathy Gardner); Ben Masters (Michael Hansen); Paul Shenar (Ben Gardner); Justin Deas (Kevin McCann); John McMartin (Martin); Gayle Hunnicutt (Claire); Joseph Culp (Danny); Matthew Penn (Billy); Paul West (Shep); Matthew Long (Vaughn Capisi); Jon Polito (Dr. James); Ellen Parker (Nurse Jennier); Lynn Webster (Police Woman); Brenda Cowling (Hotel Manager); Dennis Creaghan (Policeman).

CREW: MGM presents an Alan J. Pakula Film. *Scientific Consultant:* Mark R. Rosekind, MS, Director, Sleep Laboratory, Yale University. *Executive Producer-Production Manager:* William C. Gerrity. *Associate Producer:* Susan Solt. *Costume Designer:* Marit Allen. *Art Director:* John J. Moore. *Casting:* Alixe Gordin. *Music:* Michael Small. *Film Editor:* Trudy Ship. *Co-Editor:* Angelo Corrao. *Production Design:* George Jenkins. *Director of Photography:* Sven Nykvist. *Written by:* Jon Boorstin. *Produced by:* Alan J. Pakula, Jon Boorstin. *Directed by:* Alan J. Pakula. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Kathy (McNichol), a sensitive young flutist, cancels her vacation plans to go to Japan with her possessive, overprotective father (Shenar), and instead joins a jazz trio in New York City at the behest of Kevin (Deas). Once there, Kathy begins a romantic relationship with Kevin, but one night, a crazy stranger in search of someone named Maggie breaks into her apartment and attempts to torture her for information she doesn't have.

Kathy escapes from the nutcase and stabs and kills him. Her father forces the traumatized victim to lie to the police about the events to more forcefully suggest self-defense. But afterwards, Kathy experiences recurring nightmares and visits a sleep center for help. Dr. Michael Hansen (Masters) determines that Kathy is one of those rare subjects whose muscles actually receive signals from the brain during REM sleep—meaning that she physically acts out her dreams ... and her nightmares.

Dr. Hansen teaches Kathy to short-circuit or change her recurring nightmare about the attack, but the dreams only come back stronger, twisted and turned to become more disturbing. Kathy and Michael have a falling-out after he tests a drug on her that further allows her muscles to respond in dreams, and she has a nightmare about being raped. Afterwards, Kathy goes to London to record an album, and Michael realizes that he has forgotten to inject her with a blocker—a drug that will return her dreams to normal. Now she is in London with her controlling father, and fully capable of committing violence during her fits of sleepwalking-dreaming.

COMMENTARY: Here's a quiet and subtle horror film that wades into the delicate universe of dreams more thoughtfully and truthfully than any of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. Unsettling, methodical and deliberate, *Dream Lover* considers dreams unfathomable, emotion-laden phantasms, rather than falling back on the predictable way the cinema frequently showcases them, as special effects roller coaster set pieces.

Dreams are complex things, arising from individual personalities and personal relationships, subconscious fears and intricate, opaque connections. This Alan J. Pakula film remembers that and focuses on Kathy Gardner, played by Kristy McNichol in remote, intellectual fashion. Dreams are important to her; in fact, she is one of those rare birds who actually acts out her dreams while she sleeps, becoming violent, aroused or angry depending on the nature of the dream.

The dreams showcased arise from the particulars of Kathy's psyche and traumas. So the film essentially serves as a character piece and the dreams, rather than exposition-laden dialogue, illuminate different facets of Kathy's history and personality. "Reading" the dream imagery in the films means coming to an eventual understanding of the glacial Kathy, and that's what the film is after, though it also treads dangerously and creepily into the world of nightmares.

Kathy is a young woman who, as she broaches womanhood, is

constantly infantilized; made to feel a little girl by her overbearing, possessive father. Her dreams reveal this dynamic, and in her dream world she imagines her Dad responsible for her mother's death. She suspects that she is the replacement. Still, Kathy kowtows to his wishes. He wants her to visit Japan with him and she wants to pursue a scholarship, but he pushes and pushes.

In one uncomfortable moment, father and daughter are even revealed in bed together, and in a single brush of his shoulder, it's clear that Dad physically intimidates Kathy. Although incest is not specifically brought up, the specter of incest hangs over the film like a shroud. Kathy's problems connecting to men begin with this first relationship, with her father's insistence on seeing her in a certain, uncomfortable way—as the only woman in his life.

Kathy's dreams reinforce this idea. In them, she sees herself as a little child, shrinking before the powerful pater. She dons a childish nightgown, grasps a teddy bear and is small in stature as she walks an over-sized corridor in her home. She is then pursued by a shadow, which very well be an interpretation of her father's out-sized will forever "shadowing" her.

When Kathy defies her father and does not go to Japan, she makes love to a boyfriend. Consequently, at this happy "free" juncture in her life, Kathy's dreams change radically. Her nightmare door opens up to reveal not a new night terror, but rather a nineteenth century romantic vision, set in a Victorian park. The characters wear formal dress and the impression is of peaceful order restored. Reading this dream, one senses Kathy's relief that she has experienced, at last, a proper relationship with a man. Her dreams of romance and courting are restored.

Then, Kathy is traumatized by an intruder in her apartment, also male and one who—like her father—forces his will upon her. Kathy kills the man in self-defense, but now her actions—and her nightmare man—haunts her dreams. A dream specialist helps her relive her nightmare and learn to conquer it, and that relationship forms the remainder of the film.

Dream Lover remembers that dreams change, sometimes on a dime. After reliving her nightmare over and over and learning to conquer it, on one occasion, Kathy's learned "defense mechanism" doesn't work and the intruder rapes her. In another version of the dream, she manages to break free before the rape but is confronted with a murderous version of herself, an acknowledgment that it is her psyche

—her nightmare manifestations—that are the real danger.

In another version of the same dream, the terror shifts to one of helplessness and victimization, and how Kathy responds to this shift in her waking life is fascinating. Because she is not inhibited in her dreams, because her body treats these horrifying visions as real, Kathy also harbors real emotions—including anger—over them. She is no longer able to trust her friend, the dream doctor who helps her, because in her dream, he doesn't prevent her rape.

Dream Lover is slow and lyrical, but worthy of patience. It's occasionally stunning and disturbing, especially in the constant reliving of each step of the “intruder” nightmare. *Dream Lover* remembers that dreams are entirely personal and internal, not fantastic adventurers for tourists (like *Dreamscape*) or easily parsed punishment for one-note characters (the later *Nightmare on Elm Street* films).

The Fantasist

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Cozenove (Inspector McMyler); Timothy Bottoms (Danny Sullivan); Moira Harris (Patricia); John Kavanagh (Robert Foxley); Mick Lally (Uncle Lar); Bairbre N. Chaoimh (Monica); James Bartley (Hugh Treeling); Deirdre Donnelly (Fionnula Sullivan); Liam O'Callaghan (Detective Sergeant Farrelly); Ronan Wilmot (Patricia's Father); Gabrielle Reidy (Kathy O'Malley); May Giles (Patricia's Mother).

CREW: ITC Entertainment Ltd., in association with a New Irish Film Production Presents a Mark Forstater film. *Music:* Stanislas Syrewiciz. *Casting:* Nuala Moiselle. *Executive Producer:* Mike Murphy. *Director of Photography:* Frank Gell. *Film Editor:* Thomas Schwalm. *Associate Producer:* Vivien Pottersman. *Based on the novel “Goosefoot” by:* Patrick McGinley. *Producer:* Mark Forstater. *Written and Directed by:* Robin Hardy. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Over the objections of her family of farmers, young Patricia (Harris) moves to Dublin as a schoolteacher just as a strange assailant begins to murder sexually active women he has stalked and telephones. Patricia moves into an apartment building with a married but promiscuous writer, Danny Sullivan (Bottoms) and his wife,

Fionnula (Donnelly) upstairs, and briefly dates an odd English fellow named Robert (Kavanaugh).

Fionnula is the next victim of the so-called Victim Ripper. Inspector McMyler (Cozenove) questions Patricia about the murder, hinting that Danny may be the killer. Soon, Patricia begins to receive erotic yet disturbing phone calls from the killer. Then, one afternoon, a man breaks into her apartment, and Patricia climbs out a window and escapes, certain the killer is after her. Fortunately, she runs into Inspector McMyler, who has something in his flat he'd like to share with the frightened young woman.

COMMENTARY: A sexually twisted killer preys on young Dublin women in *The Fantasist*, Robin Hardy's closely observed horror film focusing on a fetching character named Patricia, played by Moira Harris. She's a sexually liberated single woman who regrets losing her virginity in high school, and now faces the frightening notion that any number of men—who would *all* like to bed her—could be the very serial killer plaguing the city. To employ a crude analogy, it's *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977) with an Irish brogue.

Robin Hardy directed the classic *The Wicker Man* (1973), so the horror connoisseur is in good, experienced hands here. As one might expect, given the director's credentials, *The Fantasist* successfully builds momentum at a methodical pace, ultimately hooking the viewer with its depiction of the Dublin night life—bars, clubs, discos and the like—as well as its 1980s-era observations about sexual fantasies, the reality of dating, and vicissitudes of married life (a so-called “bed of nails”).

The Fantasist holds together so commendably because Hardy never loses sight of his protagonist's dilemma. Patricia is a fascinating and appealing character, one urged by her rural family not to move to the city, but who wants a life away from the traditional (and conservative) life on the farm. She wishes to be a grown-up, to be liberated—in a word, to *experiment*, and so is lured by the lights of Dublin. Patricia is called a “cold fish” by a relative on the farm, a “prick tease” by another date, and one man even claims she isn't a woman, but a monster. And yet she isn't really any such thing. She's just logically pragmatic about letting the wrong men into her life. Given her choices, who can blame her?

Ultimately, the killer is proven to be uncomfortably similar to the other male characters. They aren't murderous, it's true, but they share the killer's egotism and desire to somehow “own” Patricia. The killer fancies himself a fantasy lover (because in reality, he's beset by a

handicap), when in fact, he can't make women like Patricia love him.

Patricia captures the audience's affections thanks to Harris's strong performance, and is a resourceful and complex final girl who undergoes a horrifying experience in *The Fantastist*'s riveting finale. The killer (or the person Patricia *believes* is the killer) arrives at her apartment and Patricia escapes by going out an upstairs window and climbing up a steep shingled roof. In this tense sequence, she flees the building by climbing down a tree, and thus proves that she's quite resourceful and ingenious.

But—of course—she's actually running from a red herring, our old friend from the slasher paradigm. And she runs right into the killer.

By the time Patricia has been lured to the killer's den, the audience is completely riveted, and the revelation of the killer's identity isn't so much the "big" surprise as is Hardy's unusual decision to elongate the confrontational scene, on and on, with killer and "final girl" uncomfortably intimate throughout.

How Patricia manages to survive this meet-up with the serial killer creates some compelling viewing, and the sequence in which she plays along with the madman, a photographer with a knife on his camera, reveals her intelligence and cunning.

The Fantastist is a clever, well-made and not very well-known thriller that has a great deal in common with the slasher format, but it differentiates itself from the pack by so clearly depicting its world (Dublin's night life) and giving audiences a distinctive final girl to root for.

The Fly

★★★★★

Critical Reception

"Though *The Fly* (wisely) forgoes any direct reference to its obvious real-life analogue, the presence of AIDS—that is the presence of AIDS victims—lends a depth and tone more profound. ... than Cronenberg's earlier elaborations on his perennial theme. Brundle's initial putrification—the blotches, sores and boils that pockmark his skin—conjure the early stages of AIDS."—Thomas Doherty, *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1987, page 40.

“...another curiously graphic film, most interesting for its suggestion of a different response to bodily sickness; though in its preoccupation with a range of disjunctions between inner and outer—with particular reference to sexuality—it is placed firmly on gothic territory...”—Judith Williamson, *New Statesman*, February 27, 1987, page 25.

“For what it is, it’s very well done.”—Pauline Kael, *Hooked*, A Williams Abraham Book, 1989, page 211.

“Extremely intense, sharply written remake of the 1958 movie that (unfortunately) goes over the line to be gross and disgusting.”—Leonard Maltin, *Leonard Maltin’s 2003 Movie & Video Guide*, Signet, 2003, page 469.

“Like many of the greatest horror films, [it] is both repugnant and rapturously beautiful at the same time. In this new classic of the genre, the primal yuck—pupal ooze, I believe—flows like water ... *The Fly* is a revelation of nature in all its anguished joy of disintegration, death, rebirth and transcendence.”—David Denby, *New York*, August 25, 1986, page 100.

“[A] mesmerizing, nauseating and fantastic experiment in terror ... a humanist plea in horror-movie clothing ... unforgettable.”—Carrie Rickey, “*The Fly* Delivers Strong Jolt of Horror,” Knight-Ridder News Service, August 19, 1986, page D1.

“The approach to familiar material is fresh and acute. It more than justifies the sheer nerve of remaking a classic ... The effects are grotesque, astonishing, perfect ... a vivid black comedy ... a harrowingly good entertainment.”—David Foil, “*The Fly*,” *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), August 22, 1986, page 12-FUN.

“Brundlefly. ★ *Shudder*.★ This is one of those movies that haunts my dreams: the dead teleported steak, the gross hairs growing out of Jeff Goldblum’s back, the regurgitated digestive goo ... ugh. It’s not just that this flick has some of the squishiest, muckiest, most disgusting FX I’ve ever seen—Goldblum’s performance is, wait for it, jaw-dropping! It’s that it all represents a level of bodily invasion that no other film can approximate ... not even the one with the chest-bursting aliens. When your own DNA, the very stuff that defines who you are, turns on you, then there’s simply nothing in the universe you can trust.”—MaryAnn Johanson, the Flick Filosopher, film critic.

“Cronenberg reaches his heights in a masterful remake of a well-liked but fairly ludicrous movie from the 1950s. Jeff Goldblum and Geena

Davis bring their characters nicely to life, playing out a science fiction-horror theme in Howard Shore's opera music to create a modern tragedy that still resonates. Charles Edward Pogue's original script was modified by Cronenberg into a man's search for scientific glory, then masculine glory, and ultimately, man's search for his shrinking humanity. The special effects are amazing, but Goldblum really makes this film something special. To put this film in context, prior to *The Fly*, Jeff Goldblum was usually the annoying sidekick in films like *The Big Chill*, with a tendency to exude obnoxiousness, but Cronenberg found a vulnerability in Goldblum and the two created one of the greatest modern characterizations in modern horror (how unthinkable it was that Goldblum was actually nominated for a Best Actor Oscar for a horror film, perhaps setting the stage for Anthony Hopkins and his win for *The Silence of the Lambs*). Cronenberg resisted his own worst instincts in trying to go obscure on the audience in this film (and in *The Dead Zone* for that matter), and produced his most lucid and his most effective film to date. Howard Shore is working on an opera based on his music for *The Fly*, and that makes perfect sense —this story is the stuff of opera.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

“Jeff Goldblum is creepy enough even without compound eyes.”— Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Goldblum (Seth Brundle); Geena Davis (Veronica Quaife); John Getz (Stathis Borans); Joy Roushel (Tawny); Les Carlson (Dr. Cheevers); George Chuvalo (Marky); Michael Copeman (Second Man in Bar); David Cronenberg (Gynecologist); Carol Lazare (Nurse); Shawn Hewitt (Clerk).

CREW: Brooks Films presents a David Cronenberg film. *Music:* Howard Shore. *Casting:* Deirdre Bowen. *Co-Producers:* Marc-Ami Boymann, Kip Ohman. *Film Editor:* Ronald Sanders. *Production Designer:* Carol Spier. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Producer:* Stuart Cornfield. *The Fly created and designed by:* Chris Walas, Inc. *Visual Consultant:* Harold Michaelson. *Art Director:* Rolf Harvey. *Costume Designer:* Denise Cronenberg. *Special Effects:* Louis Craig, Tedd Ross. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dwayne McLean. *Computer/Video Effects by:* C.W.I. *Screenplay by:* Charles Edward Pogue and David Cronenberg. *Directed by:* David Cronenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Veronica Quaife (Davis), a reporter for *Particle Magazine*, meets the brilliant physicist Seth Brundle (Goldblum) at a science

convention and he convinces her to come back to his loft-laboratory to look at his work. Once there, he shows her his “telepods,” the hardware for an instantaneous matter transportation system. There have been several problems with the technology (and a test baboon was turned inside out by the telepods). Quaife becomes Brundle’s lover and teaches him about the consistency and life of flesh ... the final element he needs to understand.

One night when Quaife is out seeing her editor and former boyfriend, Borans (Getz), a despondent Brundle tests the telepods on himself. Unfortunately, an ordinary housefly gets into the telepod with him, and the computer technology fuses the DNA of man and fly.

Before long, Seth is undergoing a degenerative disease in which the DNA of the fly seeks to destroy the DNA of the man. Meanwhile, Quaife learns she is pregnant with Brundle’s (possibly compromised) baby.

COMMENTARY: Viewing David Cronenberg’s poised, self-assured remake of the 1958 horror film, *The Fly*, one senses that this auteur prepared for a long time before making this movie. In fact, his earlier films may even qualify as research of a kind. For *The Fly* shares with *Scanners*, *Videodrome* and Cronenberg’s other efforts all those trademark and unsettling ideas about the frailty of human flesh and the fusion of the organic with mechanical.

Unlike those efforts, which occasionally fall into narrative twilight zones, *The Fly* is conscientiously sturdy and straightforward. Whereas characters in some Cronenberg films, including *Videodrome*, undertake odd, inexplicable behaviors, the individuals populating *The Fly* are recognizable human beings, with easily understood (but not two-dimensional) motivations. The result is a film of uncommon focus, and the most tragic of love stories.

Human beings are sacks of water and bulbous organs held together by the thinnest of membranes, the flesh, and *The Fly* plays cannily on the idea that flesh is both wondrous and corruptible. When Brundle seeks to teleport life instantaneously over a distance, he realizes that neither he, nor his computer, understand the flesh. *The Fly* dramatically demonstrates this in a teleportation gone horribly, bloodily wrong. A live baboon emerges from the test as steaming, mangled pulp.



Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) embarks on a dangerous experiment in David Cronenberg's remake *The Fly* (1986).

When Seth begins his romantic involvement with Veronica, sex provides him the first clue about “the poetry of flesh,” and he realizes the computer loses something in translation. This is critical, because everything in *The Fly* is ultimately seen through the lens of this romantic relationship. Veronica’s influence humanizes Brundle, a lonely sort who is so strictly regimented that he keeps five sets of the same suit hanging in his closet so as not to expend any energy on what he’s going to wear. In other words, Brundle has the dedication and singular focus of an insect. Veronica teaches him about “flesh” and about what it means to be human.

Yet tragically, once Brundle is opened up to feelings of love and passion, he’s also vulnerable to experiencing jealousy and rage. He fears that Veronica is cheating on him, and with his scientific dispassion and reason compromised, undertakes a risky experiment that finally, turns him back into an insect, this time a literal one. “I’m an insect who dreamt he’s a man, but now the dream’s over, and the insect’s awake,” he notes late in the film, realizing that his humanity was both his strength and his weakness.

In charting the frailty of human flesh, it’s inevitable that *The Fly*

gradually develops into a disease metaphor, and more specifically, an AIDS metaphor. Again, this is seen in terms of the relationship. Seth becomes an aggressive sexual animal after Veronica awakes the dormant human. He becomes addicted to risky behavior (like teleporting alone) and even starts drinking. He brings a bar chick back to his apartment for sex, exhibiting promiscuous behavior. “I’ve become free,” he tells Veronica bitterly. “I’m released and you can’t stand it.” The promiscuous sexual behavior is thus coupled with the dangerous scientific procedure, and the result is that Seth contracts the equivalent of a disease.

Weird hairs grow out of Seth’s back, but that’s just the first sign of trouble. His teeth fall out, then a fingernail comes off (with an ejaculatory squirt of fluid hitting the bathroom mirror). At first Brundle attempts to deny his illness, saying he feels great, but then he comes to accept that his humanity is draining and longs to be human one last time, for that connection to the one he loves. Like so many sufferers of debilitating disease, he’s forced to countenance the impending, gruesome death generated from within. “For the last four weeks, I’ve been afraid to see you. Now I’m afraid not to,” he tells Veronica. Finally, his only hope is that his genes will carry on in a child.

As for Veronica, she is forced to watch as her lover suffers a “bizarre form of cancer,” and worry if she too (and her unborn child) is somehow affected; if her lover’s bad behavior (both scientific and sexual) has somehow translated to her. And yet through it all, she has compassion and love for Brundle. Even in his decaying, near-fly state, Brundle acknowledges this difference between man and insect. “Insects don’t have politics. They’re very brutal,” he suggests. “No compassion. No compromise. We can’t trust the insect.”



A close-up look at Brundlefly—the fusion of man and housefly—in Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986).

In becoming a true insect, Brundle finally learns what it means to be human.

Cronenberg energetically diagrams Brundle's physical degeneration, revealing in sickening (and mostly fluid) terms how one's body can become the ultimate traitor, sabotaging health and destroying itself. Brundle's jaw falls off and, most sickeningly of all, he loses the ability to digest solid food. This man-fly is now perverted into digesting solids with a corrosive acid that liquefies his food. Then, he sucks up the nutrients in one of the nastiest and ugliest scenes in not just 1980s horror cinema, but in all of horror history. Specifically, Brundlefly attacks John Getz's character. He spits on his hand and foot, and before our very eyes these healthy human limbs are melted away to bloody bone stumps. This is so nausea-provoking as to almost be unbearable.

Besides such disgusting imagery, Cronenberg carries the disease metaphor right up to its logical conclusion. Desperate to hold onto life and reverting to denial, Brundlefly attempts his "gene-splicing methodology," a process that will require Veronica to genetically fuse with him ... and his unborn child. "We'll be the ultimate family ... a

family of three in one body,” he proposes.

Realizing that the man she loves is really and truly gone, especially after a botched teleportation that combines Brundle not with flesh, but the hard, unforgiving metal of the telepod device, Veronica ends the nightmare. She blows Brundlefly’s head off, ending their love affair permanently and also stopping the progression of a disease that has robbed Brundle of his humanity and stolen her lover from her.

The Fly is a sickening movie, replete with a notorious “birth” scene involving a giant maggot, a vision which spurs talk of abortion. But even leaving aside that issue, *The Fly* examines a common theme in 1980s horror: transformation. Specifically, it chews on the perilous uncertainty of the human condition, and the ways in which disease can appear suddenly to subvert the mind and body.

Cronenberg’s masterpiece is never easy to watch, yet impossible to turn away from. It will leave you weak in the knees, disturbed and utterly nauseated. It’s a sad movie too, because (unlike its sequel) it realizes that those suffering from diseases like AIDS or cancer don’t get happy endings. Not even if they’re in love.

Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives!

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Suspense and humor were almost absent from these geek show movies, but [director Tom] McLoughlin manages to squeeze in some of both. He has characters who are more than cardboard targets, moves the series in the direction of gothic horror movies and de-emphasizes grisly killing somewhat...”—Martin Moynihan, “*Friday the 13th* Changes for Better,” *The Times Union*, August 8, 1986, C2.

“It’s never boring, and it doesn’t gross you out ... *Jason Lives* does everything it’s supposed to ... And the movie has a sense of humor.”—Mike LaSalle, “*Jason Back with His Usual Tricks*,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, August 4, 1986, page 50.

“Cinematographer Jon R. Kranhouse and writer/director Tom McLoughlin have teamed to give us consecutive comedy and killing so that we are kept off balance ... The film is well-edited for screams. But there is no surprise. We have been here before.”—Carole Kass, “*Jason Comes Back Again*,” *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, August 2, 1986,

"This film has it all. A James Bond salute by Jason at the opening credits. A Universal Horror film-style monster resurrection at the beginning. Thom Matthews, fresh from *Return of the Living Dead*. Arnold Horschack himself, as Jason's first victim. But this film succeeds because it doesn't take itself so seriously, and does something that most films in this series forget to do. It created likable characters. Camp counselor, played by Kerry Noonan, brings a great sense of vulnerability and empathy to her character so that for the first time in one of these films, her particularly brutal death (mostly off-camera) is genuinely affecting. This is definitely one of the better *Friday the 13th* films, which isn't saying a whole lot, but give credit where credit is due."—William Latham, author, *Mary's Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Thom Matthews (Tommy Jarvis); Jennifer Cooke (Megan Garris); David Kagen (Sheriff Garris); Renee Jones (Sissy); Kerry Noonan (Paula); Darcy DeMoss (Nikki); Tom Fridley (Cort); C.J. Graham (Jason); Vincent Guastaferro (Deputy Rick); Tony Goldwyn (Darren); Nancy McLoughlin (Lizbeth); Ron Palillo (Allen Hawes); Alan Blumenfeld (Larry); Matthew Faison (Stan); Anny Ryerson (Katie); Whitney Rydbeck (Roy); Courtney Vickery (Nancy); Bob Larkin (Martin).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Terror Inc., Production. *Casting*: Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Associate*: Debra Rubenstein. *Music*: Harry Manfredini. *Special Effects*: Martin Becker. *Film Editor*: Bruce Green. *Production Designer*: Joseph T. Garrity. *Director of Photography*: Jon Kranhouse. *Producer*: Don Behrns. *Costume Design*: Maria Mancuso. *Stunt Coordinator*: Michael Nomand. *Special Effects Makeup*: Chris Swift, Brian Wade. "He's Back (*The Man Behind the Mask*)" by: Alice Cooper, Tom Kelly, Kane Roberts. *Performed by*: Alice Cooper. *Written and Directed by*: Tom McLoughlin. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 87 minutes.

P.O.V.

"We had nine screenings for the MPAA, who kept giving us an X rating. At the same time, this was the most bloodless of all the *Fridays*. But with the intensity and the number of the kills, they made us cut more and more frames out. They really did go after us. I don't think any of the other *Fridays* had nine attempts. They really wanted to make sure we didn't offend the common man."—Director Tom McLoughlin describes how the Ratings Board sought to take a whack

out of *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives!*

SYNOPSIS: Tommy Jarvis (Matthews) is still obsessed with the dead psycho-killer Jason Voorhees (Graham), and inadvertently causes the murdering lunatic's resurrection when lightning strikes a metal rod in Jason's dead heart.

The killer immediately picks up his old habits at Crystal Lake, now renamed Camp Forest Green in an attempt to hide the bloody past. The local sheriff (Kagen) thinks Jarvis is a Jason copycat, committing murders with a machete, but the lawman's daughter, Megan (Cooke) believes Tommy's wild story about an unstoppable killer. As Jason murders paint-gun "weekend warriors" and threatens a summer camp brimming with unsuspecting children, Jarvis plots to get rid of Voorhees once and for all by trapping him at the bottom of Crystal Lake where he once drowned.

COMMENTARY: *Jason Lives!* announces its intentions to be a whole new ball game from the first frame. To wit, the slasher Jason Voorhees walks out to the middle of the frame and, like some murderous James Bond, slashes his machete across the screen. This is an appropriate and very funny parody of the famous 007 opening that's graced those films for decades. This touch is silly, inventive and helps to put the killer franchise back on solid footing after the bad misstep that was Part V.

Friday the 13th Part VI is a good, solid horror movie in part because it has the courage to declare something that has been obvious for some time but which the movies have failed to acknowledge: that Jason is a supernatural entity, not merely an average slasher. In keeping with this shift in Jason's nature, director Tom McLoughlin for the first time adds a touch of the Gothic to the series.

The opening sequence finds Tommy Jarvis, now played by *Return of the Living Dead*'s Thom Matthews, and his friend, played by Ron Palillo, sneaking into a cemetery to see if Jason is really dead. A lightning bolt revivifies Jason as though he were some denizen of the Frankenstein family. This is a great tribute to horror history, and—though I hesitate to use the words—a real "new beginning" for the character. Now Jason need not be limited in either his look (and indeed, in future entries he begins to decay and decompose) or his supernatural actions. Even better, McLoughlin, a closet classicist, has created a "mythology" for Jason and Tommy Jarvis, one that connects and binds them. Jason made Tommy the man he is in *Part IV* (a deranged kid) and now, by reviving his nemesis, Tommy has made

Jason the thing he is.

Another interesting facet of this series re-imagination is that the connection between Jason and nature (usually a storm) is also finally made explicit. In all the previous entries, during the worst of Jason's attacks a lightning-and-thunder storm always rolls in. Here, it goes one step further: lightning resurrects the monster. And yet, even though this is a supernatural touch, it is a faithful inclusion in the mythos given all the other *Friday the 13th* movies that occur on dark and stormy nights.

The evolution of Jason from knife-kill slasher to supernatural boogeyman was a trenchant change, not only because it opened up the *Friday the 13th* saga to new subject matter, but because the change reflected the time. By 1986, Freddy Krueger and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films were on a meteoric ascent, and those movies offered a wider appeal than the *Friday* films because they could include dynamic special effects and visits to the fantasy dream dimension. With Jason becoming a supernatural creature, more elaborate make-ups could be included in his design, and the world need not be limited to the exhausted slasher milieu.



The killer that broke the sheriff's back: Jason murders Sheriff Garris (David Kagen) in *Jason Lives*, the sixth installment of the

Friday the 13th saga. Photograph by James H. Armfield.

Given this change, however, it's ironic that *Jason Lives* is the first *Friday the 13th* film to include something that one would expect was taken for granted: young campers at a summer camp! Although counselors have been featured in many of these entries, not a single *Friday the 13th* film before *Part VI* actually included as a focus children attending a camp. Perhaps that is why Jason is scary again in this movie. To see that monster in the same frame (though outside a window) with little kids is something of a shock. In one dynamically shot sequence, Jason watches from outside a cabin as a camp counselor inside attempts to rally the kids in their bunks. Jason shadows the counselor's every move, going from window to window as she walks the length of the establishment. It's well-done and creepy, and the shot arises from McLoughlin's understanding of film as a visual art as well has his experience with mime.

This is just one iconic look at Jason, and that's another realm where this sixth installment excels. There's a terrifically impressive shot of the slasher astride an overturned trailer, his backdrop the mountains and forest as smoke rises. Voorhees is like the master of the jungle here, a lion on a mountaintop. For an encore to that legend-building composition, there are several great shots of Jason looming in the water, not unlike the shark from *Jaws*, waiting to come up and strike.

This is a sequel that gets just about every detail right, when so many of the films before it got things wrong, or only half-right. But what truly makes this film excel is its sense of humor. There's a great sequence where Jason stands in the middle of the road and blocks an oncoming car. "I've seen enough horror movies to know any guy wearing a mask isn't friendly," the driver tells her husband, in a splendid example of pre-*Scream* post-modern humor. Another funny touch involves one of the young campers reading Sartre's *No Exit* as he falls asleep. And who won't laugh at the scene involving two teenagers in the woods as—for the first time in horror film history—it's the young man who doesn't wish to engage in sex! Talk about turning the slasher paradigm upside down!



Director Tom McLoughlin (left) directs Ron Palillo (center) for a graveyard scene that sees Jason Voorhees resurrected in *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives*. Photograph by James H. Armfield.

McLoughlin also has wicked fun with the in-vogue idea of “survivalists” and “weekend warriors” in his *Friday the 13th*. Jason runs across several outward bounders who are playing with paint guns in the forest. They adorn headbands with the word “dead” once they’ve been shot. Jason engages them and, with his gleaming new machete, offs three with one, sweet swipe.

Energy, wit, likable characters and a new focus on the supernatural mythology of Jason Voorhees make *Jason Lives!* more enjoyable. In a series with eight installments in one decade, it’s nice to have at least one of the later sequels prove to be of such silly (but still scary) intent.

“It’s over, it’s finally over,” Tommy states at the end of the film, after Jason, like some latter-day quasi-Sisyphus, is chained to a rock and dragged to the bottom of Crystal Lake. Of course, given Hollywood’s obsession with sequels, especially in the Reagan decade, we know Tommy’s wrong. Jason will be back, but it’s nice for a moment to contemplate that this movie lands Jason right back where he started: drowned in the lake beyond Camp Blood. It’s nice to think of the story coming full circle, even if briefly.

CLOSE-UP: Resurrecting Jason: Tom McLoughlin, the director behind the exquisite low-budget neo-Gothic, *One Dark Night* (1983), wasn't initially interested in helming a sixth installment of the popular slasher saga, *Friday the 13th*. In fact, he was much more keen on helming a fantasy-comedy-romance, but silver screen horrors were the big thing at the time.

"I was trying to get *Date with an Angel* going, and the only thing I had to show people was *One Dark Night*, so all I was offered were horror movies," McLoughlin explains. "I said that I didn't want to do that next; I wanted to do something different. Then I had a picture at Paramount that looked like it was going to happen but didn't, so Paramount offered me to write and direct a *Friday the 13th*.

"My agent said, 'You should really do this.' And I said, 'But I'm not that in love with the series.' I saw the first one, I thought it was great—but I hate when people keep cloning things instead of making something original. And my agent said, 'Well, this is going to open in 1500 theaters'—which was a big number back then. 'And they're going to let you write it.' So I said, 'Well, can I put comedy in it?' And he said, 'You're going to have to talk to Frank Mancuso about that.'

"So I called Frank and said, 'I'm interested in doing this, but I would really love to put in a slightly comic spin.' And he said, 'You're not going to make fun of Jason, are you?' And I said, 'No, I just want to make the characters likable. I want them to have a sense of humor. I did that in *One Dark Night*.' The idea is to have characters that you like who are witty.

"I also said, 'We're doing the sixth one, Frank. The audience knows what they're going to get, so why not comment on it?' Why not have characters say 'Any time I see a guy in a hockey mask I know he's not going to be friendly.' The audience loved that! It was the beginning of nodding at the clichés and having fun with them.

"Still, Jason is going to kill the shit out of you, but this time he's going to do it in a way none of the other movies did. If you look at the movie, every kill is unimitatable with normal human strength. He's lopping off three heads simultaneously, or he's twisting a head all the way around and pulling it off, or he's punching a heart out. I really wanted to go for that complete over-the-top thing, have the audience yell 'Shit' out loud when it happens; yet at the same time blend in a sense of humor and parody."

Even though McLoughlin wanted to put a new, more ironic and

humorous spin on the series, he still had to contend with some unfinished business from *A New Beginning*. Namely, an adult Tommy Jarvis had appeared in the previous installment, played by John Furie.

“I did go after John Furie, who played Tommy in that movie,” says McLoughlin. “He was asked, and he turned it down. He really didn’t want to do another one of the movies. I wasn’t too heartbroken, because I really wanted to jump from *Part IV* to *Part VI*. *Part V* bothered me a bit because it wasn’t really Jason. It was somebody impersonating Jason. And the director Danny Steinmann did not really seem to care about the horror. He was more interested in the pornographic aspect of it, because that’s where he came from, porno. I don’t think he’s done a movie since then. I don’t know—and I don’t know him personally, so I don’t know what kind of person he is—but the film to me just didn’t feel like it was about what the series really should have been about.

“When I was researching the films and watched them all back to back, I said, ‘I literally need to put a mythology together of why *Friday the 13th* is what it is.’ For an audience that has long forgotten the first one, you can give them a classy campfire ghost story. It’s about a town that wants to forget about this [bloody past], right down to changing the name from Crystal Lake to Forest Green. That there was a total denying that this campground had any past.

“But once Jason was resurrected in classic Frankenstein fashion with a lightning bolt, I felt that—like any animal—you return to the turf that you know. You’re drawn back psychically to where you’re supposed to be. By the end of the movie, since the young boy Jason drowned in Crystal Lake, the objective I had then was: ‘How does our hero put him back where he’s supposed to be?’ So if the series ended there, it could have. It’s all over: Jason’s back in the lake where he’s supposed to be. But of course we had that one last minute in the movie where—underwater—his eyes open...”

McLoughlin indicates that this “sting in the tail/tale” conclusion was never intended while he was making the film.

“Frank Mancuso realized *Friday the 13th* was not over yet, that this movie was putting life into the series again. We had one shot of Jason’s eye opening when his neck was being chopped up, and we inserted that, so it gave us that final shot. And obviously he’s continued to carry on ever since...”

Jason Lives announces its intention to be more lighthearted but also

more classically oriented than its predecessors right from its introduction, the riff on the famous James Bond gun barrel opening ... only featuring a machete.

“The Bond series was the definitive series and why not say to the audience right up front, ‘Here comes Jason, he’s following in Bond’s footsteps?’ And that really set the right tone for the movie.”

Interestingly, *Jason Lives* was also the first film in the series to actually feature children at a summer camp. That sounds like a no-brainer, but it’s the case. All previous films had involved houses or camps filled with teens and adult counselors, but not actually camping kids.

“In a sequel, upping the stakes, I thought, was important,” McLoughlin notes of this modification in the formula. “These murders usually happen before the kids get to the camp. The counselors are screwing and getting killed, because there’s that dark moral code: Have sex and Jason will kill you. I thought that was not as important from a mythology point of view of as having him come back to where he once killed.

“You thought the kids would be okay, but the formula twisted on you. And the possibility that one of them could get killed actually loomed in the audience’s imagination. ‘They wouldn’t do that, would they?’”

Playing on this audience fear for the children was part of the fun for McLoughlin, teasing them and shattering expectations. “The Nancy character wakes up from having a dream about a monster, so there’s that sense that all kids worry about what’s under the bed. They’re in a camp they’ve never been before, they’re away from home, and I put the joke in there about one of the kids reading *No Exit*. And somebody brought their hamster in a cage, which was a symbol of innocence in a cage.”

It is during this sequence that McLoughlin staged one of the film’s finest shots. Inside, a counselor calms and appeases the fearful children. Outside, seen through the windows, Jason peers in, shadowing every move. He’s undetected, but moving in lock-step with the counselor. It may sound like a simple set-up, but it’s elegant and quite scary.

“Those are the moments that are pure cinema. I try to find those in all the movies I’ve done. It’s not what you’re being told, it’s what you see. And sometimes it’s what you *don’t* see and what you imagine. That’s sometimes where you really participate in art. I’ve always tried to

embrace that rule.”

When *Jason Lives* bowed, the impossible happened. The film received a number of positive reviews ... a first for the *Friday* saga.

“Believe me, no one was shocked more than me,” McLoughlin laughs. “Obviously, Paramount was ready to be blasted as they always were. And the *Los Angeles Times* even made comment on that thing that I did where I broke the fourth wall, and had the caretaker look into the lens and say ‘Some folks have a strange idea of entertainment.’ That line was quoted and the *L.A. Times* wrote ‘How can you hate a movie that’s totally making fun of itself?’”

The success of *Jason Lives* sparked further sequels, and also talks between Mancuso and McLoughlin that the director might helm another installment. Mancuso also mentioned McLoughlin’s involvement with a dream project called *Freddy vs. Jason*.

“All the other [*Friday*] directors say the same thing, Frank talked to them about doing a *Freddy vs. Jason* movie. So when he first came to me, I said sure. The problem is that Freddy and Jason exist in two different realms, Freddy in a dream realm and Jason in a real realm. It would have been difficult to make a movie with them unless we brought in a third element—like Abbott & Costello did in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. ”

McLoughlin had an interesting notion about who should represent that third element. “Cheech and Chong...”

From Beyond



Critical Reception

“Stuart Gordon strikes again, and this time brings *Dawn of the Dead*’s Ken Foree along for the ride. More Lovecraftian glee, perhaps not the classic film that *Re-Animator* was, but a good follow-up, with a more typical Lovecraft storyline of things from the other world. This film probably deserves more respect than it currently gets, in the shadow of Herbert West.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeffrey Combs (Crawford Tlinghast); Barbara Crampton (Dr. Catherine McMartin); Ken Foree (Bubba Brownlee); Ted Sorel(Dr. Ed Praetorius); Carolyn Purdy-Gordon (Dr. Bloch); Bunny Summers (Neighbor Lady); Bruce McGuire (Jordan Fields); Del Russell (Ambulance Driver); Dale Wyatt (Paramedic); Karen Christenfeld (Nurse); Andy Miller (Patient); John Leamer (Shock Technician); Regina Bleesz (Bondage Girl).

CREW: Empire Pictures Presents a Brian Yuzna production. *Line Producer:* Roberto Bessi. *Casting Director:* Anthony Barnao. *Stunt Coordinator:* Remo De Angelis. *Costume Designer:* Angee Beckett. *Production Designer:* Giovanni Natalucci. *Associate Producer:* Bruce Curits. *Film Editor:* Lee Percy. *Music:* Richard Band. *Special Effects by:* John Buechler, Mark Shostrom, John Naulin, Anthony Doublin. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Albert Band. *Adapted from H.P. Lovecraft's "From Beyond" by:* Brian Yuzna, Dennis Paoli, Stuart Gordon. *Screenplay by:* Dennis Paoli. *Executive producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Brian Yuzna. *Directed by:* Stuart Gordon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Catherine McMartin (Crampton) visits the incarcerated Crawford Tlinghast (Combs) in an asylum to assess his sanity after he is discovered in a house of horrors along with the headless corpse of his former mentor, Dr. Praetorius (Sorel). She learns from Crawford that the two men were working on a way to stimulate the pineal gland and grow a third eye and—in conjunction with a machine called a resonator—open a doorway to another dimension. McMartin is fascinated by this idea and releases Crawford so he can recreate the experiment in Praetorius's house.

She brings along a representative from the police, Bubba (Foree) and before long, they have made progress. Praetorius, now transformed into a demonic creature, contacts them from beyond and claims that he is the master of that domain. McMartin and Crawford repeat the experiment, but their contacts with the mad Praetorius grow more dangerous. Plus, the stimulation of the pineal gland also results in increased sexual drive, and Dr. McMartin shows a side of herself to Crawford she has kept carefully hidden. Bubba realizes the danger of the resonator and plans to destroy it, but Praetorius is growing madder and more powerful.

COMMENTARY: Stuart Gordon's follow-up to the dazzling *Re-Animator* (1985), *From Beyond* also teeters uncomfortably on the verge of camp, though *From Beyond* is less helter skelter and slightly less mad. It's a good film nonetheless, one that obsesses on reality detected

and reality invisible (thus another example of the “don’t worry/be afraid” duality in eighties horror), and it’s overall a satisfying effort.

The crux of *From Beyond* is a dangerous experiment to stimulate the pineal gland, “a dormant sensory organ” also known as the Third Eye. Stimulating this new vision, however, swings open the doorways of perception to a dimension inhabited by ghoulish, nightmarish monsters that seem to swim through the air like fish navigate the sea. The depictions of these horrible creations is one of the film’s highlights. There’s a nasty, horrifying scene in which Bubba sees his legs and torso devoured by a swarm of other-worldly insects.

From Beyond’s heroine is portrayed by sexy Barbara Crampton, who also appeared in *Re-Animator* but is a revelation here. She plays a scientist growing increasingly addicted to “seeing” into the new and dangerous realm. Even though the exploration of this vast unknown wasn’t enough for another scientist, Praetorius, and he eventually left our dimension to taste its pleasures (since the five senses were no longer enough for him), she persists in following in his footsteps.

A side effect of her addiction is sexual stimulation, and so this ambitious, intellectual scientist simultaneously dives into her darkest subconscious fantasies, dressing up as a leather dominatrix and attempting to seduce her co-workers. Like *Hellraiser* in 1987, *From Beyond* thus explores the notion of desire run rampant and charts that gradual loosening of self-control in relation to a discovered gateway to another reality.

Essentially, this film serves as a Lazarus story about science overreaching, yet also one about the personality’s darkest, most buried desires bubbling to the surface. This is important because the 1980s represent a time of conservative family values on the surface, but also desires unleashed. Cocaine was the drug of choice, and some people persisted in having unprotected sex, despite the rise of AIDS. Even those who were deemed moral, like Jimmy Swaggart, were found to be human and acting in secret on their lustful impulses. As humans, we may seek to repress such foibles, but—also as humans—it’s part of our makeup, this urge to experience the unknown, the sensual, the dangerous. And we don’t need a stimulated pineal gland to detect this other reality. It’s right there, just beneath the surface of the culture.

Critical Reception

“Calling it a Ken Russell film explains much, but there is much to digest in this film. A wonderful cast, some clever music (by Thomas Dolby of all people), and a haunting final image bring the story of Byron and the Shelleys and their famous ghost story contest (that would spawn *Frankenstein*) into a strange, other realm that seems to gather a sense of decadence into the prism of Mary Shelley’s past and future tragedies and shows us a strange world where a story like Victor Frankenstein’s might have been created. It’s all very over-the-top, except for the portrayal of Mary Shelley by Natasha Richardson. Mary is portrayed as almost boring, so it is only fitting that the longest-lasting nightmare would come from her pen.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gabriel Byrne (Byron); Julian Sands (Shelley); Natasha Richardson (Mary); Miryam Cyr (Claire); Timothy Spall (Dr. Polidori); Alec Mango (Murray); Andrew Wisniewski (Fletcher); Dexter Fletcher (Rushton); Pascal King (Justine); Tom Hickey (Tour Guide); Linda Coggin (Turkish Mechanical Woman); Chris Chappel (Man in Armor); Mark Pickard (Young William); Kiran Shah (Monster).

CREW: Miracle Pictures and Virgin Vision Presents a Ken Russell Film. *Casting:* Mary Selway. *Costume Designers:* Victoria Russell, Kay Gallwey. *Production Designer:* Christopher Hobbs. *Film Editor:* Michael Bradsell. *Director of Photography:* Mike Southon. *Music:* Thomas Dolby. *Produced by:* Penny Corke. *Executive Producers:* Al Clark, Robert Devereux. *Written by:* Stephen Volk. *Directed by:* Ken Russell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In June 1816, Mary (Richardson), Shelley (Sands) and Claire (Cyr) visit Lord Byron (Byrne) at his country estate and indulge in every manner of fantasy and sexual game they can conceive. However, the gauntlet is laid down when each writer is challenged to come up with the most horrifying ghost story he or she can imagine. From this crucible—a night of madness (and drug use)—the legendary story *Frankenstein* is born.

COMMENTARY: Although the demented and frenzied events depicted in this glorious period piece are reported to have occurred in reality over a span of weeks and not in a single, mad night, Ken Russell’s frenzied, vision-filled *Gothic* nonetheless seeks to paint for audiences a compelling picture of the manner in which the *Frankenstein* legend may have been birthed. The creative impulse to craft art, or terror, is

thus examined.

If *Gothic* proves any standard by which to judge, it must have been a delirious and wild time to “conjure up” ghosts and imagine literary horrors. Mary at least, seems vexed by a very personal and tragic demon, and one which ultimately finds expression in the character of Dr. Frankenstein. In particular, Mary obsesses over her still-born baby. “My fear,” she confesses, “is that I’d do anything to bring that child back to life again.”

Nestled within that desperate, almost pleading thought rests the essence of the *Frankenstein* mythos; both the pain that drives man to push the boundaries of science and conquer death, and the defiance of God’s will.

In his essay, “Filming the Birth of Frankenstein: *Gothic* and *Haunted Summer*,” Russell scholar Kevin Flanagan states that *Gothic* is essentially a biopic of Mary Shelley and that, as such, it adheres closely to the patterns and history of Russell’s filmic canon. To wit:

The film operates on two threads of logic found elsewhere in Russell’s work, specifically tailored. First, it uses condensation to make huge bodies of information filmable. All of the events of the summer are merged into one fantastically charged night of mayhem. Character neuroses are compressed too, with Mary’s (Natasha Richardson) anxieties over her still-born child becoming a central determiner of her definition of horror, and Byron’s (Gabriel Byrne) obsession with his sister as the justification for his sexual deviancy.²⁰

Flanagan argues that Russell also “tailors the mood to the subject matters of his film.” Meaning, simply, the artist deploys a gaggle of expressionist techniques to transmit in *Gothic* the “delirium of drug use.” “Therefore,” Flanagan continues, “camera angles are skewed, narrative causality is eliminated in favor of schizophrenic psychadelia, and objective storytelling give way to the emotional intensity of individual experience.”²¹

In other words, *Gothic* is one weird trip.

The highly sensual and uniquely personal film also highlights the decadent and debauched life of Byron, “the Exile Lord,” as he engages his friends to imagine the scariest of scary tales. Byron (Byrne) is depicted as a vampire of sorts, feeding on the others, gaining strength, it seems, from their fear, sexuality and so on. During the long, wild

night Byron and the others descend into games of madness and sex. There's an orgy even, and the movie pointedly informs the audience that these men and women believed and practiced free love. Indeed, they are the rock stars of their age, the great poets, and this too reflects on Russell's career since he's vetted a rock fantasy or two (*Tommy* [1975], *Lisztomania* [1975]) in his time.

Indeed, the closest parallel to *Gothic* is not to be found in the horror genre, but rather in Oliver Stone's 1991 rock biopic, *The Doors*, which charts the decline of another mad outcast and poet, Jim Morrison. Opening his doors to perception via drugs, Morrison experiences visions of his own death and in the process of destroying himself, achieves a kind of literary immortality. In their mad night of overwrought, hysterical visions, the group in *Gothic* also encounters personal apocalypses and phantasms. They must reckon with the power of creation itself ... the idea that their decadent imaginings have fostered a terror, a monster from the Id.

"What we have created with our minds we can destroy with our minds," it is finally suggested, when the specter of a monster proves too real. Whether a monster exists at all in this cinematic equivalent of a very bad drug trip, is contingent entirely on the mood and intoxicating power of the night. For, as *Gothic* reminds the viewer, "There are no ghosts in daylight."

Flanagan is on to something important when he suggests that Russell's delirious form (cockeyed angles and the like) reflect the movie's content. Talk about altered states: This movie represents sensory overload! That style powerfully vets the tale, yet *Gothic* won't be to everyone's taste. It's odd and fascinating, but burnished by truths that, seen in that cold light of day, are occasionally insipid. If you've ever had a discussion with someone who is high, you'll know exactly what I mean. The profound ideas that seem so meaningful to them in that delicate, heightened state, often look foolish or pretentious to people on the sidelines. As delirious as *Gothic* is, it steadfastly remains someone else's high, and so, in some fashion, the audience is left out.

The Hitcher

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Another '... from Hell' movie, this time preying on the doubts that

anyone who has ever considered picking up a hitchhiker must experience. This film is a cult favorite, probably because at the heart of the film the relationship between the victim and his almost supernatural oppressor is so fascinating.”—Stephen Foster. *Shivers*, Issue #32, 1996, page 15.

“[O]n its own terms, this movie is diseased and corrupt ... reprehensible.”—Roger Ebert, *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie*, Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2000, page 170.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rutger Hauer (John Ryder); C. Thomas Howell (Jim Halsey); Jennifer Jason Leigh (Nash); Jeffrey DeMunn (Captain Esteridge); Billy Greenbush (Trooper Donner); Henry Darrow (Trooper Hancock); John Jackson (Sgt. Starr); Jack Thibeau (Trooper Prestone); Armin Shimerman (Interrogation Sergeant); Eugene Daws (Trooper Dodge); Jon Van Ness (Trooper Hopscomb); Tony Epper (Trooper Conners); Tom Spratley (Proprietor).

CREW: HBO Pictures with Silver Screen Pictures Presents a Feldman/Meeker Production. *Casting:* Penny Perry. *Music:* Mark Isham. *Co-Producer:* Paul Lewis. *Film Editor:* Frank J. Urioste. *Production Designer:* Dennis Gassner. *Director of Photography:* John Seale. *Executive Producers:* Edward S. Feldman, Charles R. Meeker. *Special Effects Supervisor:* Art Brewer. *Special Effects Drivers:* Robert Suer, Jim Daily. *Visual Effects:* Cinema Research Corporation. *Written by:* Eric Red. *Produced by:* David Bombyk, Kip Ohman. *Directed by:* Robert Harmon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Driving a car to an owner in San Diego, a sleepy traveler, Jim Halsey (Howell), picks up a hitchhiker, John Ryder (Hauer), who claims to be a murderer and says he just wants Jim to stop him. Jim manages to push the psychotic out of his vehicle, but Ryder begins a cross-country killing spree that he blames Halsey for.

Halsey attempts to prove his innocence to a Texas waitress, Nash (Leigh), even while the authorities pursue him, believing him to be the killer. A strange bond developing between hunter and prey, Ryder helps Halsey during a police chase, bringing down a chopper and destroying several squad cars. Ryder captures Nash and threatens to kill her (in a most gruesome fashion), if Halsey doesn't kill him. The police finally realize what is happening, and allow Jim to go to Ryder, but Halsey is reluctant to murder Ryder. The cost for his recalcitrance is high, and leads to a roadside showdown.

COMMENTARY: The road trip across the American frontier—the West—goes horribly awry in the paranoid fantasy, *The Hitcher*. It's a film depicting a nightmarish personal apocalypse as a driver (C. Thomas Howell) is framed for murder after murder by an enigmatic stranger, the hitchhiker John Ryder (Rutger Hauer). He seems to have no motive, but under the surface, a deep homoerotic sub-text informs the film.

"There's something strange going on between the two of you," a police official notes at one point, and he's exactly right. John Ryder wants to play a sadistic game with Halsey, and clearly sees his quarry in sexual terms. When Ryder (even the name indicates a dominant role in a sex game; as well as Hauer's status as a "rider") first meets Halsey and gets into his car, the homosexual sub-text begins in earnest. "My Mom told me never to do this," Howell says with an innocent grin as an ice breaker. Ryder responds by grabbing Jim's knee and saying "Just lookin'," an early reflection of his interest in Halsey. When he moves first to threaten the young man, he does so in a decidedly sexual context too: pressing his switchblade hard against Jim's crotch.

"I want you to stop me," Ryder states his motive for harassing Halsey later in the drama, but one senses that what the stranger wants is to encourage Jim to play back, to be his partner. It's a game of give and take, and he needs Jim to play it. When Halsey asks him again, "why are you doing this to me?" Ryder once more responds in almost a flirtatious style: "You're a smart kid, figure it out."

Halsey can't figure the relationship out even after Ryder murders Nash (Jennifer Jason Leigh). He has thus removed the only female character in the film and therefore the only heterosexual obstacle to his winning of Halsey's affection. Nor does Halsey figure out until too late that he shares an odd symbiosis with Ryder. They are aware of one another's presence—as if they catch each other's scent—even when one is ensconced behind a one-way mirror.

Other moments also reinforce the kinky, decidedly sexual bond between tormenter and victim. When Halsey spits in Ryder's face, the hitcher covets his spittle as though the gesture is one of affection. And when Halsey finally gets the drop on Ryder, he caresses his mortal enemy with a rifle barrel, an obvious phallic symbol. The film's closing shot, which finds Halsey lighting up a cigarette as the audience first saw Ryder do at film's opening, suggests explicitly a post-sex indulgence, an after-glow. In movies (and sometimes in life), people light up after intercourse, because the sensations from smoking are stronger after sex. Halsey choosing to light up and smoke

following the film's bloody climax is surely an indicator that his sexual game with Ryder has been played to conclusion. That now, after-glow comes.



He just won't stay dead. John Ryder (Rutger Hauer) launches another attack in *The Hitcher* (1986).

Seen in light of these underpinnings, *The Hitcher* is quite a perverse little movie, but, of course, it's possible to enjoy the movie without such sexual analysis too. For instance, *The Hitcher* features a classic 1980s horror moment when Ryder sneakily deposits a severed finger into a plate of French fries at a diner ("the specialty of the house"). The film evokes gasps of horror and knee-jerk suspense as we watch in horrific close-shot as a hungry Halsey jams one French fry after another into his mouth ... until he gets, at last, to the finger.

Another iconic moment is Nash's brutal death scene near the Outpost Café, a truck stop. She is bound to a truck cab and the truck's caboose, and when Ryder starts the vehicle, he rips her in two. This is a nasty fate, but as Ryder might remind us at this juncture, all's fair in love and war.

The road trip gone wrong is a sturdy horror subgenre that has been deployed to great effect in everything from *Duel* (1971) to *Road Games* (1982). *The Hitcher* adds some spectacular stunts, some violent gunplay and buckets of blood to the mix, as well as the sadomasochistic central relationship. Apparently Roger Ebert objects to the film on the basis that it doesn't have the courage to be what it's really about: two men sharing a freaky sexual relationship. I disagree. *The Hitcher* knows exactly what it's about, and through all the imagery and dialogue makes it virtually impossible not to read the film as the horror highway version of *9 1/2 Weeks*.

In fact, this fetishistic subtext which seems in some fashion (like *Freddy's Revenge*) to involve the concept of homosexual panic, makes the film fire on more than one cylinder. The action set pieces on the scenic roads are superb and the droll, physically imposing Hauer is always a convincing psychopath, yet it's the psychological terror and the dynamic relationship between these two men that grants the film its dazzling and disturbing intensity.

House

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"It's kind of fun, not really scary, it has an interesting Vietnam twist, and it has Richard Moll. It spawned sequels. Doesn't everything?"—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*,

Cast and Crew

CAST: William Katt (Roger Cobb); George Wendt (Harold Gorton); Richard Moll (Ben); Kay Lenz (Sandy); Michael Ensign (Chet Parker); Susan French (Aunt Elizabeth); Mary Stavin (Tanya); Erik Silver/Mark Silver (Jimmy); Alan Autry, Steven Williams (Cops); Jim Calvert (Grocery Boy).

CREW: New World Pictures presents a Sean S. Cunningham Production, a Steve Miner film. *Music:* Henry Manfredini. *Casting:* Melissa Skoff. *Associate Producer:* Patrick Markey. *Production Design:* Gregg Fonseca. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Film Editor:* Michael N. Knue. *Stunt Coordinator:* Kane Hodder. *Creature Design:* Kirk Thatcher, James Cummins. *Written by:* Ethan Wiley. *Story by:* Fred Dekker. *Produced by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *Directed by:* Steve Miner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Nobody wants to read about Vietnam ... they want a good horror story.”—Roger Cobb’s (William Katt) agent encourages him to stick to the genre in the surprise hit, *House*.

SYNOPSIS: Roger Cobb (Katt) is a horror writer going through a bad spell in his career and personal life. When his dotty old aunt (French) dies by an apparent hanging, Roger moves into her house. Unfortunately, this is the same estate where his son Billy (Silver) disappeared some time ago, an event that led to Cobb’s divorce from his TV star wife (Lenz). Roger comes to feel that the house—which neighbors believe is haunted—may hold the answers to his son’s abduction, and also some of Roger’s terrible memories from the Vietnam War.

After he is attacked by a monster in the closet, Roger enlists the aid of his neighbor, Harold (Wendt), but he can’t help Roger face his own personal demons. Soon, doorways into the house turn into portals to other times and dimensions. In one, Roger returns to Vietnam and sees Billy trapped there. He comes to realize that the ghost of a soldier he left behind, a fellow named Ben (Moll), is responsible for taking Billy, killing Aunt Elizabeth, and the ghostly manifestations in the house. Now—with his war demons made flesh—it’s time for Roger to fight for his son. Unfortunately, he also has to baby-sit a neighbor’s obnoxious little kid.

COMMENTARY: An unexpected commercial hit, Steve Miner’s *House* is a pleasant horror movie experience, one replete with an appealing

pop soundtrack, a good cast, and some amusing jokes. Sort of a middle-class, homogenized *Evil Dead*, it's an acceptable, if not overtly terrifying effort.

There's a surprise behind every door in this *House*, but not much logic, and that's the film's stumbling point. Miner seems to understand that dramatic flaw in his material, because at the fifty-minute point—just as the movie has begun to grow tiresome—he interjects the 1960s pop hits “You're No Good” by Clint Ballard, Jr. and “Dedicated to the One I Love” in a series of funny musical montages. This is a brazen attempt to appeal to the baby-boomer, yuppie demographic, and for a while, it almost works.

Still, for all its *Fright Night*-like comedy-horror rhythm, *House* actually fits another movie trend in the 1980s. By the middle of the Reagan decade, it was suddenly acceptable, even fashionable to discuss the Vietnam War again. After years of shunning the topic, *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985) made a good, old-fashioned war movie out of a return to Vietnam, and Oliver Stone's dramatic *Platoon* (1986) explored the conflict more subtly and seriously. In the horror genre, the trend was evidenced too in such features as *House* and Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* sequel.

In *House*, the lead character played by William Katt is a writer who also happens to be a Vietnam vet, and the movie sets up an interesting dynamic in regards to this background: Katt deals with his “ghosts” from that conflict (and particularly an accusation of cowardice) while a literal ghost, that of a fellow soldier (played by Richard Moll), also haunts him.

This ghost steals Cobb's son and whisks him off to a rubber reality dimension where the boy is trapped in a bamboo cage in the jungle, a Vietnamese setting. It's only by conquering his guilt and ghosts about Vietnam and finding his inner courage that Roger Cobb is able to rescue his son. It's not particularly deep, but the subplot about the Vietnam War reveals the Zeitgeist of the mid-1980s: Vietnam nostalgia. In particular, most of these films seemed determined to validate the experience, acknowledging the service of the troops and rewriting the conflict so that America could win “this time,” as Rambo famously said.

It's rewarding that *House* tries to operate on two thematic tracks, with literal and psychological ghosts equated, but ultimately the movie is cartoonish and two-dimensional rather than deep or thought-provoking. The creatures and ghosts are interesting in depiction, but

seem designed to provoke chills and laughs rather than terror. They look like comic-book creations, and are saddled with cartoon-like voices in some instances. Indeed, the film gravitates towards humor, especially in a sequence in which Cobb must baby-sit a neighbor's child. Not surprisingly, this sequence has almost literally nothing to do with the remainder of the film.

House really fumbles the ball in terms of horror, because the rubber reality it creates has no sense of order or rules. There's a gateway through Cobb's medicine cabinet, and one in his closet, and by jumping into the water in the Vietnam world, he ends up in his pool in the backyard. It's pure phantasmagoria unlike, say, *Poltergeist*, which carefully established the rules for reaching and returning from the "the other side." Here, it's all just fun and games, and that's fine, but the ending of the film makes no sense, and at times, the characters don't seem to respond appropriately to what's happening.

For instance, Cobb shows almost no remorse for killing his wife. It's as if he knows that the end of the movie is going to provide him a reset button, and everything will be fine.

House is a trifle from a director capable of much more, but who can blame a guy for wanting to have a little bit of fun now and again?

LEGACY: A truly atrocious sequel, 1987's *House 2: The Second Story* established a wobbly franchise under the generic title *House*. *The Horror Show* (1989) is known in some corners as *House III* and the direct-to-video sequel *House IV* hit video shelves in 1992. In *House IV*, star William Katt (briefly) reprises the role of Cobb.

Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf (a.k.a. *Stirba—Werewolf Bitch*)



Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Lee (Stefan Crosscoe); Annie McEnroe (Jenny Templeton); Reb Brown (Ben); Marsha A. Hunt (Mariana); Sybil Danning (Stirba); Ferdinand Mayne (Eric); Judd Omen (Mad); Patrick Field (Deacon).

CREW: Hemdale Presents a Granite Productions Film. *Associate Producer:* Robert Pringle. *Film Editor:* Charles Bornstein. *Music:* Steve Parsons. *Director of Photography:* Geoffrey Stephenson. *Executive*

Producer: Grahame Jennings. *Based on the novel "Howling II."*
Screenplay by: Robert Sarno, Gary Brandner. *Produced by:* Steven Lane.
Directed by: Philippe Mora. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You see that dwarf staring at us?”—Just one funny line among many in Philippe Mora’s sequel to *The Howling* (1981).

SYNOPSIS: TV reporter Jenny Templeton (McEntroe), occult werewolf hunter Stefan Crosscoe (Christopher Lee) and Karen White’s brother, a sheriff from Montana named Ben (Brown), join forces to look into Karen’s unusual death. As Stefan relates, she was working on a case involving a community of werewolves. Some werewolves, it turns out, are immune to silver bullets and must be killed with titanium, which complicates things.

Worse, the thousand-year anniversary of the werewolf leader’s birth is fast approaching. During that celebration for Queen Stirba (Danning), all werewolves shall reveal themselves to the world at large. To defeat the malevolent Stirba, Crosscoe and his cohorts must head to Stirba’s castle in the Transylvania mountains. There, they will confront the newly rejuvenated werewolf monarch, who has been busying herself with a ménage a trois with a burly Transylvanian hunk and a punk werewolf from L.A., Mariana (Hunt).

COMMENTARY: I knew something had gone drastically, inexplicably wrong when I saw Reb Brown’s name in the credits.

Howling II, the so-called “rocking, shocking new wave of horror,” by the film’s own advertising, sets a new warp speed record in sequel degeneration. Many horror franchises weather a decline in quality over time, over the span of three, perhaps even four entries. For example, it took *Jaws* three movies to hit rock bottom. Ditto *It’s Alive*.

Certainly, there have been precipitous drops from original to sequel before, especially in the 1980s with efforts such as *Return of the Living Dead II* (1987) and *Fright Night 2* (1988), but nothing on the scale of the plummet seen here, between the outstanding Joe Dante film, *The Howling*, and this moribund sequel. There’s a precipitous, nearly unbelievable, and totally incomprehensible level of failure here. If *The Howling* is an A-list movie, its offspring doesn’t even merit the title B-movie. It’s more like a sub-Z movie. Hyperbole? No, *Your Sister Is a Werewolf* is truly *that* bad.

Sometimes a movie is so bad, it’s difficult to know where to begin. I’ll start with the funeral at the film’s opening. Karen White (Dee

Wallace's character in the first film) is dead, and her funeral is held, open casket. Philippe Mora is so inept a director that he puts the open casket in the frame's foreground, the audience in the background, further away. Why is this choice the wrong one? Primarily because the actress playing Karen White can clearly seen to be breathing throughout the sequence, her chest rising and falling with regularity. This factor kills the illusion that she's a corpse, unless Mora was trying to tip his hand to the fact that she's a werewolf and will be resurrected later. That's giving him too much credit, methinks.

Secondly, Mora apparently thinks he's making *Star Wars* or its equivalent here, because he adorns his sub-par film with a number of elaborate, flowery, transitional wipes, leading us from one sequence to another. He doesn't just employ the wipe sparingly (like *Star Wars*), he goes to town with it. There are spirals, circles, progressive clock-hand wipes and the like. Really, the material (and how it is vetted) doesn't deserve such a grand treatment. Then—even more laughably—midway through the film, with no antecedent, the words “The following afternoon” appear on the screen. Usually, if it's necessary to quadrant off a film into sub-headings (like Kubrick's *The Shining*), this will be a consistent *leitmotif*. Not here.

Howling II is clearly a low-budget movie, so perhaps it isn't fair to rag on the special effects, but the costumes and makeup are atrocious. The werewolf costumes look more like gorilla suits, and in lieu of actual transformations (the bread-and-butter of the far superior progenitor film), Mora's camera focuses on the same quick cuts of “pieces” changing. In other words, the audience is presented with no less than four separate shots of pointed werewolf ears twitching. There are also several close-up views of wiry hair growing, and it looks like a sudden outbreak of pubic hair more than anything else.

I suspect Mora saved a bundle of money making this film, because he's certainly frugal with his soundtrack. A new wave punk band called Babel performs at a night club called The Slammer. Christopher Lee is in the audience, wearing punk glasses, for what is apparently the only song in their repertoire: “Howling.” This infuriatingly catchy tune gets repeated five more times in the film. Most memorably, it occurs during a werewolf orgy, and then over the end credits.

Finally, the moment when *Howling II* descends to camp (and lower) occurs midway through, as Sybil Danning, Marsha A. Hunt and a swarthy Transylvanian get into bed and—wearing furry outfits—pretend to engage in a hairy *ménage à trois*. The hapless performers grunt and squeal and claw at each other like overeager outcasts from

the Broadway show *Cats*, and the meager sense of mood and horror the film has generated totally dissipates.

Lastly, some mention must be made of the closing montage. It features seventeen—count 'em!—quick cuts of amply endowed Sybil Danning ripping off her shirt and revealing her oversized, melon breasts. Accompanied by Babel's non-hit, the film editor quirkily (and amusingly) repeats this reveal with reaction shots from the cast, including Christopher Lee. It may be the only intentionally funny sequence in the whole film, but it certainly reveals that someone working on this film knew exactly what the film was: an utter crapfest. The only way they could possibly sell this baby was with Sybil Danning's assets on display.

Hooray for the breast part of the movie! Danning's "assets" are the only thing in this movie that don't disappoint.

Invaders from Mars

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"I like to think of this as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers Babies*, with that cute kid saving the world from alien pod people. Cheeky and cleverer than you'd expect it to be, this is one of the better SF remakes, one that doesn't make you wonder why on earth someone even bothered to remount the story. It gets a generational boost from the spunky, resourceful Generation X'er-ness of its young hero."—MaryAnn Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic.

"Tobe Hooper is a different director again (the guy who made this made *Lifeforce*?). Back before remakes were the flavor of the month in Hollywood, this was a remake that didn't much improve on its original—where it introduced some better ideas, it lost the charms of the old film. Tobe seemed to be wandering around, trying to figure out what kind of films he was supposed to be making."—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary's Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Karen Black (Linda); Hunter Carson (David Gardner); Timothy Bottoms (George); Laraine Newman (Ellen); James Karen (General "Mad Dog" Wilson); Bud Cort (Young NASA Scientist); Louise Fletcher (Mrs. McKellch); Erie Pierpoint (Sgt. Rinaldi); Christopher Allport

(Captain Curtis); Donald Hotton (Old NASA Scientist); Kenneth Kimmens (Officer Kenny); Charles Dell (Mr. Cross); Jimmy Hunt (Police Chief); William Bassett (NASA Scientist).

CREW: The Cannon Group, Inc., presents a Golan-Globus production of a Tobe Hooper film. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Associate Producers:* Edward L. Alperson, Wade Williams. *Production Designer:* Leslie Dilley. *Director of Photography:* Daniel Pearl. *Film Editor:* Alan Jakubowicz. *Special Visual Effects:* John Dykstra. *Invaders Creatures designed and created by:* Stan Winston. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Stunt Coordinators:* Steve Lambert, Eddy Donno. *Based on the screenplay by:* Richard Blake. *Screenplay by:* Dan O'Bannon, Dan Jakoby. *Produced by:* Menahem Golan, Yoram Globus. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Little David Gardner (Carson) awakes in the middle of the night to see a UFO burrow into the field beyond his home. The next morning, his father George (Bottoms) returns from a trip to Copper Hill changed, somehow less human. That afternoon, Dad also takes Mom (Newman) up to the hill, and she too returns changed. David tries to get his school nurse, Linda (Black), to believe his story, and together they embark on a fantastic and bizarre adventure, following David's cruel schoolteacher Mrs. McKellch (Fletcher) into the subterranean spacecraft of a Martian invasion!

Inside, Martian drones patrol, and Linda is captured for "conversion." David defies the Martian Supreme Intelligence and, with the help of the Marines and General Wilson (Karen), takes the fight for the planet right back to the invaders from Mars.

COMMENTARY: The Martians are coming in Tobe Hooper's 1986 remake of *Invaders from Mars* (1953), but they have faces only a mother could love. And that, in a strange way, is the movie's point. From start to finish, this film represents the phantasm of a slightly isolated, slightly "spaced" (in the words of his schoolmates) pre-teen boy who has seen too many 1980s blockbusters such as *Gremlins* (1984), *The Goonies* (1985), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1985) and *Poltergeist* (1982). Like the 1950s version it emulates so carefully, Hooper's *Invaders from Mars* is a film seen entirely through the filter of childhood, but this time around it is a media-saturated 1980s childhood rather than one based on the conformist, Communist-baiting 1950s. Hooper's film is careful to note the similarities of the 1950s and the 1980s, as well as the differences. *Invaders from Mars* is Hooper's third social commentary about the media's impact on youth after *The Funhouse* and *Poltergeist*.

Adhering to the idea that the film is being told from a child's point of view, adults are depicted as frightening, contradictory and remote automatons, perspectives reinforced by Hooper's frequent use of the low-angle shot in compositions involving David's parents, teachers, and local policemen. Worse than the strange and thoughtless behavior of the adults, however, Dad takes away Mom's attentions (with something insidious called "sex"?), transforming her into a thoughtless zombie in the process. Also evoking the sensibilities of a child, the U.S. army is apparently "cool" beyond belief (and also working hand-in-hand with NASA) and the aliens are slobbering, fantastical monsters that none but the young could possibly imagine (let alone combat).

David's subconscious (dreaming) mind imagines his elaborate adventure with the Martians, and his fantasy is based in no small part on the popular movies he has seen at his local cinema or on television (probably without supervision). Even the décor of his bedroom reinforces the impact these 1980s productions have had on his tortured psyche: his bed sheets, wallpaper and toys are all merchandising tie-ins for space operas, movies and TV shows, packed with robots and spaceships galore.

By maintaining the original film's focus on a "boy's life" and one kid's perceptions of a less-than-welcoming adult world, Hooper honors the 1953 source material. But in casting the events of the film three decades later, he takes the source material further, modernizing the invasion for a more savvy generation. He enriches the film with startling new images and technologies (particularly in the realms of special effects, lighting and make-ups) that are markedly different than anything the original's director William Cameron Menzies would or could have contemplated in the early 1950s. But rather than taking viewers into a dark, minimalist tunnel without hope, Hooper leavens the package with humor and with topical references and satire, a far cry from the grim, desperate feeling of the Menzies film. Today's "realism"-minded audiences may not enjoy the fanciful, child-like innocence of this homage-minded, almost whimsical remake, but perhaps that is more a statement about the state of contemporary culture than Hooper's directorial skills. *Invaders from Mars* (1986) is droll entertainment for adults and a totally engaging one for children. It has moments of high fear and nightmarish imagery, but no more so than *Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* or other dark fantasies that have enraptured America's young for decades.



Little David Gardner (Hunter Carson) contemplates an alien invasion in Tobe Hooper's 1986 remake of the 1953 *Invaders from Mars*.

At the core of the new *Invaders from Mars* is a meditation on childhood and an examination of one child (David) in particular. This is a boy who feels disenfranchised from the adult world. His nightmare about invading Martians is symbolic of the forces and relationships in his life and the film makes that point in a number of interesting ways. One dark night, Daddy Gardner takes Mom up to Copper Hill, his arm around her in an embrace, and she returns from the (off-screen) experience drastically changed, "possessed" by the Martians, and much less concerned with her son's well-being. David sees her go, walking arm in arm with her husband, and immediately understands the danger. He fearfully cries out for her to stop before it is too late, a telescope (one of many phallic symbols in the film) at his side.

This element of the story, the abandonment by Mother Gardner, is no doubt an explicit reference to sex and the fear of a child that the sexual, spousal relationship could become more important to the all-important Mother Figure than is the nurturing, maternal one. Thus it is no accident that the "evil" that transforms Mom in Hooper's *Invaders* comes at the end of a massive, phallus-like mechanism that

“penetrates” her neck. Even the Martian control device it implants there (itself another phallus) is a tool (i.e., the penis) that takes Mommy’s attention away from her child.

Late in the film a Martian drone speaks to David in his father’s voice. David has equated his father with the enemy, the competitor for his mother’s affections. In one terrifying sequence, David lies cringing in his bed and his father (seen only from the neck down) approaches, silent and dangerous, motives uncertain. David is unsure what horror is to follow, a beating, an attack, even molestation, but his father eventually leaves him unharmed, taking only his coin collection. Still, the fear and helplessness of a child in his bed is captured with chilling efficiency.

Hooper’s use of film language is the most impressive it has been since *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. His always-on-the-prowl camera not only records David’s nightmare of alien invasion, it successfully expresses his situation, his mood and his feelings of isolation. The opening shot, that of David and his Dad lying flat on their backs in the grass, stargazing, should be a peaceful, idyllic one. Instead, forecasting the horror to come, the high angle perspective (always the harbinger of doom in the cinematic lexicon) grows increasingly disturbed. As the camera nears its objects, it commences a fast spin, rolling over and over. This spin reveals that David Gardner’s world is about to be turned upside down, and that below the surface of perfect suburbia trouble exists.

Throughout the film, Hooper’s well-placed camera continues to express the plight of the film’s dreaming protagonist. On the school playground, David is framed inside a metal jungle gym, a surrogate jail cell of sorts, and the message is clear: He’s caged like an animal. Of all the children on the playground, only David is “trapped” in this fashion, simultaneously indicating his special status (as the star of his own dream) as well as his knowledge and his isolation. Later, David is literally surrounded by stuffed, mounted animals in miniature cages in his teacher’s van, and the blocking is very much the same, expressing the identical point: This is a nightmare David cannot escape. In the original film, Menzies staged many shots, nay entire sequences, in minimalist, oversized sets to achieve similar results: feelings of entrapment and isolation. Instead of relying on art design, Hooper falls back on his thorough understanding of film grammar, *mise-en-scene* and cutting. And, not unlike John Carpenter, Hooper is quite expert at using the background and foregrounds of shots to convey important, frightening information. Once the evil has suffused the town, David is stalked by his school bus and it prowls silently behind

him in an impressive sequence. Even more frightening is a scene in which David, mesmerized by the TV, fails to notice shadows stirring on a staircase in the background. These details may sound small, but taken together they are part of the tapestry of a perfectly composed horror film.

Since *Invaders from Mars* is the story of David's fear of alienation from his own mother (who is busy going to school as an accountant and tending to her husband), it is no wonder that much of the film's screenplay involves the boy's "courting" of a more-appropriate mother-surrogate, the kindly school nurse portrayed by Hunter Carson's real mother, Karen Black. Linda Magnuson frequently relies on David's judgment, is often rescued by him, and even cowers under his protection. Some audiences found this scenario blatantly unbelievable, but one must always remember that this is a film seen through David's pre-adolescent eyes. In his dream, he is ever the hero, and many events that seem unrealistic become recognizable instead as personal fantasy. Rather than showing skepticism for a child's claim that Martians have landed, the U.S. government and armed forces demonstrate total faith and support in the boy. They even go so far as to permit David to take part in the assault against the alien spaceship and fire a Martian cannon (take that, Donald Rumsfeld!).

David's two-dimensional view of his teacher, Mrs. McKellch (Louise Fletcher), is also the stuff of a juvenile fantasy. David just knows that this teacher has it in for him and, of course, she does. She couldn't possibly have concerns about David because of his work habits or behavior in school because children don't think in anything but the most egocentric terms. Therefore, the only way to explain McKellch's hostility is to write her off as a Martian stooge. David's rationalization about Mrs. McKellch's behavior, casting her as a monster in her dream, also signifies David's special status within his own world. He is not only a misbehaving child, but the *one* soul in all creation who can foil the Martian invasion and see the adults for what they really are.

Unlike *Aliens* (1986) or *Independence Day* (1996), the alien invasion of Hooper's film is the kind of tactic imagined by a child. How else to explain that the aliens arrive on Earth in search of copper, just as Gardner's class goes there on a field trip, studying copper? It all dovetails neatly because it is the dream of a single, pre-pubescent mind.

When reviewing any film, it is useful to ask what goal the movie sets out to reach and then judge whether or not it meets those ambitions. One can look at Hooper's purpose, to re-tell for the 1980s a child's

nightmare that he found meaningful during his formative years in the 1950s, and judge the results. In striving for a faithful revamp of a famous story, Hooper uses another favorite trick from his magician's bag: the homage.

Thus *Invaders from Mars* is not merely David's fantasy, but an amalgamation, a synthesis, of all such 1950s films that Hooper has enjoyed over the years. When Dr. Weinstein of SETI attempts to communicate with the Martians and is killed by the malevolent drones, his ill-fated plea for peace references a similar moment in Howard Hawks' *The Thing* (1951) and George Pal's *The War of the Worlds* (1953). In the 1950s sci-fi-horror cinema, there was always some namby-pamby, peace-loving scientist (read: Communist) willing to welcome (read: collaborate with) the aliens. But in the end, no accommodation could be reached with the monsters, and the stupid scientists paid the price for their appeasing behavior. Dr. Weinstein's blatantly ridiculous peace, in the presence of a fang-faced Martian monster, recalls this tradition and gently mocks it. None but an idiot would attempt to peaceful co-existence with a set of teeth on legs! Likewise, when another character exclaims "Great Scott!" he is purposefully echoing 1950s, *not* 1980s, slang, thus reminding the viewer of the epoch that gave rise to these alien invader films.

And, of course, Hooper goes to great lengths to reference the Menzies film in particular. Jimmy Hunt (who played the dreaming child in the original film) returns here an adult, muttering, "Gee, I haven't been up here since I was a kid," as he walks to his doom beyond the white side-rail fence. David's school is named Menzies Elementary, and the first film's Supreme Leader is glimpsed briefly in the school basement (alongside a pod from the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]). All these references let audiences know (a) that the director honors his filmic predecessors and (b) that this picture need not be taken as a serious polemic about alien invasions. It isn't an *Aliens*, *Star Wars* or even *Poltergeist*, but rather a post-modern, reflexive variation on a popular theme. It's designed to be fun.

The sci-fi fans who find Hooper's *Invaders from Mars* unsatisfactory might ask themselves if Hooper could have made a serious alien invasion film instead, if that was his intent. The answer to that query is affirmative. In fact, the Hooper project immediately preceding *Invaders from Mars* was *Lifeforce*, just such a story! Obviously, Hooper opted to make a very different kind of movie this time, a tribute to the flawed but beloved genre films of his childhood. Those who don't like the movie sometimes fail to see that it isn't "childish" in execution, but told from the viewpoint of a child. That's a critical difference.

Beyond the entrapment imagery, the interesting perspective and multiple instances of homage, *Invaders from Mars* is interesting and provocative because of its many touches of humor. Even before the decade was finished, Hooper was already lampooning Reagan's 1980s. In *Poltergeist*, a Reagan biography found its way into the hands of an admiring yuppie. In his next picture after *Invaders*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2*, he poked fun at the "greed is good" yuppie values of the business-oriented Reagan era. But in *Invaders from Mars* he crafts a wicked satire by comparing the prosperous but empty-headed decade of Reagan to that of Eisenhower's similarly vapid 1950s, the very decade that gave rise to the alien invasion of genre as well as the boomer generation of Spielberg, Carpenter, Lucas and Hooper himself! The Gardner family life in *Invaders from Mars* is thus pure *Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66). In that sense, the parents are conformist drones even before the Martians arrive to spoil things for David! The scenes between Timothy Bottoms and Laraine Newman are two-dimensional in the extreme, but intentionally so. Hooper has his actors play these scenes tongue-in-cheek, like *Father Knows Best* (1954–63) on acid, and his subversive approach is illuminating.

The 1950s and the 1980s are alike in many ways, including resurgent patriotism, paternal (read: old) presidents and escalations of defense spending to win the Cold War. Both decades are often viewed as a “return” to simple American values, and thus quite unlike the turbulent ’60s or complex ’70s. More to the point, every little David Gardner in 1980s America longs for the existence of the 1950s set-up: a world where parents lived together in bliss, in sitcom perfection, to nurture the children. It is no mistake that as the Martians arrive, their first act is to split up the parents (read: divorce) and thereby transform David into that modern phenomenon, the latch-key child who must go it alone because the parents are too busy with careers (or whatever) to be home at the end of the school day. Especially relevant is one early sequence in which David comes home from school to find his house empty, save for the eternal babysitter: the television. He turns it on, and it is showing Hooper’s own *Lifeforce!* This passing reference is more than simple homage. This is a deliberate stab at the culture that provides violent entertainment for children under the umbrella of PG-13, yet simultaneously allows no at-home parents to protect the exposed child. It’s no wonder that David experiences a violent, disturbing nightmare: The media is saturated with violence (like *Lifeforce*) and there is no parental figure to shepherd him through it and protect “family values.” Once again (as in *Poltergeist*), the TV is a portal that lets evil into the household.

The re-shaping of the 1980s into the 1950s works wonders for *Invaders from Mars*, as does its *Alice in Wonderland* template. Little David, a latter-day Alice, falls down a hole into the world underneath and, as usual for Hooper, the new realm turns out to be a surreal place. In one egregious example of Hooper’s daring, the new Martian Supreme Intelligence is seen emerging and retracting from a hole in the wall that can only be described as a bio-mechanical anus. Another surreal moment involves the humorous death of Louise Fletcher’s character, always so properly dressed as a 1950s-style school marm. She is devoured by a Martian drone in precisely the same manner that David earlier saw her eat a frog! Head and body are gulped down, leaving dangling legs, then nothing. It’s a funny visual joke that many viewers missed. Another wonderful tongue-in-cheek moment is James Karen’s declaration “Marines have no qualms about killing Martians!”

The Kindred

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Allen Brooks (John Hollins); Amanda Pays (Melissa Leftridge); Talia Balsam (Sharon Raymond); Timothy Gibbs (Hart Phillips); Peter Frechette (Brad Baxter); Julia Montgomery (Cindy Russell); Bunki Z (Nell Valentine); Kim Hunter (Amanda Hollins); Rod Steiger (Dr. Phillip Lloyd); Charles Grueber (Harry); Bennet Guillory (Dr. Stone); Edgar Small (Dr. Larson); Randy Harrington (Paramedic).

CREW: *Presented by:* F/M Entertainment. *Executive Producer:* Joel Freeman. *Music:* David Newman. *Casting:* Janet Hirshenson, Jane Jenkins, Danise Chamian. *Associate Producer:* Diane Nabatoff. *Film Editors:* John Penney, Earl Ghaffari. *Production Designer:* Chris Hopkin. *Special Makeup Effects:* Matthew Mungle. *Director of Photography:* Stephen Carpenter. *Co-Producer:* Stacey Giachino. *Written by:* Stephen Carpenter, Jeffrey Obrow, John Penny, Earl Ghaffari, Joseph Stefano. *Produced by:* Jeffrey Obrow. *Directed by:* Jeffrey Obrow, Stephen Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. John Hollins (Brooks), son of the brilliant geneticist Amanda Hollins (Hunter), learns more about his mother's odd work when she awakens from a coma. She tells him of a heretofore unknown "brother" named Anthony, and a dangerous project. At his mother's deathbed request, John, his girlfriend Sharon (Balsam) and a group of associates, including the mysterious Melissa Leftridge (Pays), spend the weekend in Shelter Cove, at Amanda's abandoned home, in order to find her journals and destroy all that remains of her research.

Working against the team is Dr. Phillip Lloyd (Steiger), a competing geneticist who wants Anthony for himself. During the weekend, John discovers that his mother was working on a form of hybridization and that the fruit of her labor and experiments still exists, and is quite murderous. Anthony, in fact, is a very large human- deep-sea creature hybrid with tentacles and an appetite for human flesh. John and the others set out to destroy Anthony, only to realize that Melissa is a spy for Dr. Lloyd and that she too shares some marine life DNA. A pitched battle is fought at Shelter Cove between the scientists, Anthony, and a score of young Anthony clones, tiny squid-like fetus-creatures capable of latching onto people.

COMMENTARY: *The Kindred* is a wet, splattery horror movie featuring buckets of blood, gore, and even a slimy fetus underfoot here and there. In one nasty moment, an angry fetus leaps out of a clogged sink and attaches itself to a person's face. In another harrowing moment something horrible sprouts out of a ripe

watermelon—and tentacles wrap around a terrified grad student as she's driving a car, forcing its way into her mouth and ears.

If these descriptions sound appealing, you may just enjoy *The Kindred*, which spotlights better-than-average special effects, and boasts the gorgeous Amanda Pays as a human-fish hybrid (ironic, given the actress's role in 1989's *Leviathan*). Of course, the movie never adequately answers the question why one would want to create a hybrid of a fish and a person, but that's okay. In the meantime, you get a siege on an abandoned house, a group of attractive grad students wondering what's lurking beneath the house's floorboards, and the incomparable Rod Steiger as a totally bonkers scientist who wants the secret to hybridization. In a *tour de force* special effects moment, Pays goes from being an air-breather to a sea-breather with gills, and it's a harrowing sequence not easily forgotten.

Hybridization has today become a big issue in horror television and film. Alien-human hybrids were an important part in the overall "abduction" arc on *The X-Files*; and in the 2005– 06 Shaun Cassidy series, *Invasion*, weird alien sea life and humans were also joining up to become strange hybrids. *The Kindred* gets to that kind of material relatively early, and with a maximum of violence, gore and carnage. Accordingly, some moments in the film are quite scary (as when a specimen pops out of a jar and attacks Melissa), and the finale— involving a basement-cave and a giant monster—is the kind that *Blood Beach* (1980) dreamed of featuring.

Of course, there are all kinds of questions you could ask about the film. For instance, why does it take three days in the house for the grad students to search the basement? That's slack, even by academic standards. And secondly, why does the team go around with lights and an undependable generator when they could have just paid the electric bill and actually had lights on in the home? The biggest question is the one I indicated above, why would you cross a human with icky sea beasties anyway, and after doing so, would you do an about-face and destroy it?

Despite such gaps in narrative logic, *The Kindred* is mean and harsh and filled with death, and that makes it a "science gone awry" horror movie to reckon with.

King Kong Lives



Critical Reception

“It’s not a bad film, it’s just a big case of ‘why bother?’ None of it has the gravitas of the archetypal King Kong story, and, if nothing more, it makes you appreciate the finer points of Dino’s first *Kong* film (which are few and far between). When news first came out that this film was being made, people generally snickered. They laughed harder when they saw the film. A standout scene (if you can call it that) is Kong stuck in a pile of rocks by some rednecks who are a little nasty to the old boy. Yup, somebody probably storyboarded this movie too.”—William Latham, author of *Eternity Unbound* and *Mary’s Monster*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brian Kerwin (Hank Mitchell); Linda Hamilton (Amy Franklin); John Ashton (Colonel Nevitt); Peter Michael Goetz (Dr. Ingersoll); Frank Maraden (Dr. Hughes); Peter Elliott (King Kong); George Yiasom (Lady Kong).

CREW: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group Presents a John Guillermin Film. *Casting:* Donna Isaacson, John Lyons. *Creatures created and constructed by:* Carlo Rambaldi. *Production Design:* Peter Murton. *Director of Photography:* Alec Mills. *Film Editor:* Malcolm Cooke. *Music:* John Scott. *Executive Producer:* Ronald Shusett. *Production Manager:* Lucio Trentini. *First Assistant Director:* Brian Cook. *Story and Screenplay by:* Ronald Shusett, Steven Pressfield. *Based on the character King Kong created by:* Merian C. Cooper. *Stunt Coordinator:* Bud Davis. *Produced by:* Martha Schumacher. *Directed by:* John Guillermin. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ten years after his fall from the World Trade Center in Manhattan, the giant gorilla dubbed King Kong is still on life support at the Atlanta Institute, and in desperate need of a blood transfusion so that he can have replacement artificial heart surgery.

Meanwhile, in Borneo, a hunter named Hank Mitchell (Kerwin) captures a female ape of similarly gigantic proportions and negotiates for her use by the Atlanta Institute for the necessary transfusion. After the surgery is conducted by Dr. Amy Franklin (Hamilton), Kong awakes from his long slumber and detects Lady Kong in the facility nearby, but is quickly sedated because of his weak heart. Before long, Kong escapes from his restraints and frees Lady Kong, spurring a battle royale with the U.S. Army and the nasty Colonel Nevitt (Ashton). Kong and Lady Kong go off the radar for a time, but Lady Kong is recaptured and held in secret captivity because she is

pregnant. Thought dead after a fall, Kong returns for his bride after a period of months, defeats the Army and lives long enough to see the birth of his gigantic son.

COMMENTARY: Although the opinion is not widely shared among film critics, Dino De Laurentiis's *King Kong* (1976) was a good, perhaps even great monster movie, and also a runaway box office hit.

Berated as an inferior re-imagination of the 1933 original, this disco decade production in fact seemed a perfect re-casting of the timeless tale, taking into account forty years of Zeitgeist and new cultural touchstones. The 1930s age of adventure in the original gave way to the exploitative age of the early 1970s and fears about an energy crisis. Robert Armstrong's adventurous, go-for-the-gusto, macho Carl Denham was replaced by Charles Grodin's Fred Wilson, a greedy, nature-raping oil company executive.

Fans of the 1933 original cried foul over the remake for many reasons, some justified (the campy tone), some not (the attempt to update the material; the decision not to include stop-motion animation). Still, few reviews can honestly deny that the 1976 *King Kong*—at the very least—featured a sense of epic scope, of grandeur. No expense was spared to bring the world of Kong to vivid life. There was the vast, turbulent sea buffeting the oil ship, the sweeping long shots of authentic Hawaii jungle locations doubling as Skull Island, the impressive smoky bank and portal to the island, and a fantastic matte painting of that giant wall separating the natives from Kong. Authentic Manhattan locations, and a fine cast headed by Jeff Bridges and Grodin, all represented part of the film's pleasing equation too.

Ten years after Kong conquered the box office, De Laurentiis and director John Guillerman re-teamed for an encore, the unfortunately named *King Kong Lives*. On the face of it, the film's creators afforded their sequel with none of its predecessor's strengths whatsoever, beginning with production values.

No human characters return from the first film, so don't expect Jessica Lange or Bridges to show up, except in flashbacks. And indeed the only real reason to vet a sequel to a film like *King Kong* without a connection to characters the audience already knows, is to feature an all-out, go-for-broke battle with an oversized, powerful opponent. *Superman II* understood this necessity, granting Christopher Reeve's Kal El three super-powered villains from Krypton to battle over the streets of Metropolis. What *King Kong Lives* really needs is a villain worthy of Kong, a monster (like Godzilla) for the giant gorilla to

square off against. Instead, and to the disappointment of viewers, the great ape's opponent in this film is merely the United States Army, which inspires only a shrug.

Audiences can detect that *King Kong Lives* leaves behind the expensive, convincing world of *King Kong* from its earliest sequences set at the Atlanta Institute. It is immediately learned, for instance, that Kong survived his fall from the World Trade Center and has been on life support ever since. This is ridiculous plot point #1. Kong is berthed in a giant warehouse, where he lies comatose, and he requires a blood transfusion.

“Only one thing will save Kong ... *a miracle*,” Linda Hamilton, playing a no-nonsense heart doctor, breathlessly intones, in the solemn, straight-faced tradition of a hundred 1950s-type “lady scientists.”



A view of the Eighth Wonder of the World from *King Kong Lives* (1986).

That miracle conveniently arrives in the next scene (ridiculous plot point #2) when Brian Kerwin's character discovers a randy Lady Kong in the jungles of Borneo. The contrivance is almost too much to bear,

but that's not the worst of the matter.

When the infamous surgery scene finally arrives, it doesn't disappoint. It's one of the most ludicrous scenes ever captured on celluloid. There are huge, Dumpster-sized blood bags for the transfusion, gigantic blood tubes, and a colossal circular saw for slicing into Kong. And when the artificial heart is ready to be removed, a forklift—the jaws of life, apparently—lifts out the great beast's injured heart and replaces it with the machine (all accompanied by squishy sound effects).

"Let's go to work," says Hamilton gravely, again evidencing a face so straight that it's funny. It's as though she doesn't realize where she is or what she's doing; she's not registering the reality that her character is conducting surgery on a gigantic prone ape with props on the scale of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957).

Which brings up a technical point. King Kong fell from the World Trade Center after being shot up by helicopters. Yet he is unconscious at the Atlanta Institute with no scarring, and no broken bones. What would have been really funny was if the film found our hero, the convalescing gorilla, donning a giant arm-cast or finger-splint. Of course, *King Kong Lives* occurs some ten years after *King Kong*, so perhaps one can safely assume all of the mighty monkey's bones have been re-set by the time of the heart operation.

The special effects are no better and no worse than those that appear in the 1976 *Kong*. In fact, it seems that ten years haven't really gone by at all, since the same stable of visual tricks (men in suits, especially) are reused without variance. The problem in *King Kong Lives*, however, is that this time director Guillermin and cinematographer Alec Mills stage a number of important shots head on, at eye level with Kong and Lady Kong, and therefore, these creatures don't seem very huge. Like the Toho Godzilla movies, it's clear that these "giant apes" are just guys in costumes, treading over miniature sets and trying to shamble like monkeys. Unlike the 1976 *King Kong*, this sequel never really sells the colossal presence of these beasts. At least in that film, the makers had the good sense to point the camera up at Kong, giving him a sense of height and power missing here.



Where's Fay Wray when you need her? Brian Kerwin is held by Lady Kong in *King Kong Lives*.

The biggest rap against *King Kong Lives* is the inconsistency of its tone. The title itself, and some specific scenes suggest intentional campy humor, but the actors play the material absolutely straight, and the

filmmakers certainly want viewers to feel compassion for the apes and their offspring, Baby Kong.

The only moments that actually seem designed for comedy are also *King Kong Lives'* best. In one such instance, Kong steps on a preppie kid's sports car and crushes it before heading across a golf course. In another, Kong dispatches a group of rednecks who have set a fiendishly clever trap for him. These bumpkins capture the beast by staging an avalanche between the walls of a quarry, and the stones bury Kong up to his head. The rednecks then step into the frame with Kong's head and snap photos with their trophy. The hunters try to make Kong drink whiskey and poke at his face with torches, but once Kong breaks free, they're toast.

Kong breaks one redneck in half, bites the head off another and then—comically—picks his teeth. This violent (but amusing) sequence is the only one that seems to boast any sense of attitude about Kong. The scene creates a sense of sympathy for the beast, and then satisfaction when he destroys his tormenters. Had the rest of the film played on this ridiculous level, like a cartoon about animal cruelty, the filmmakers might have been on to something worthwhile.

The ending of this film, which finds Lady Kong and Baby Kong frolicking unfettered in a nature preserve, was lifted hook, line and sinker for the final moments of *The Lost World: Jurassic Park II* (1997).

Finally, there's one classic (and funny) moment in this thoroughly unnecessary sequel. Her face never cracking a smile, Linda Hamilton entices Brian Kerwin into her sleeping bag for sex with the unforgettable come-on, "We're primates too..."

So how about some monkey love?

LEGACY: Though *King Kong Lives* was a colossal flop (and helped edge DEG closer to bankruptcy), you can't keep a good monkey down. In December 2005, Peter Jackson's three hour-plus, \$200 million remake of the original *Kong* film premiered. Kong was convincingly depicted in CGI form. Despite glowing reviews, the film was not as big a hit as pundits had anticipated.

Link

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Elisabeth Shue (Jane Chase); Terence Stamp (Dr. Phillips); Steve Pinner (David); Richard Garnett (Dennis); David O'Hara (Tom); Kevin Lloyd (Bailey); Joe Belcher (Taxi Driver).

CREW: The Cannon Group Inc. Presents a Richard Franklin Film. **Music:** Jerry Goldsmith. **Apes Trained by:** Ray Berwick. **Production Designer:** Norman Garwood. **Director of Photography:** Mike Molloy. **Film Editor:** Andrew London. **Executive Producer:** Verity Lambert. **Co-Producer:** Rick McCallum. **Casting:** Priscilla John, Jackie Burch. **Stunt Coordinator:** Tony Smart. **Written by:** Everett De Roche. **Story by:** Lee Zletoff, Tom Ackerman. **Produced and Directed by:** Richard Franklin. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 103 minutes.

P.O.V.

“That we are alike and different. That ‘civilization’ (political correctness and the like) is a thin veneer—yet that one percent genetic difference makes a *huge* difference.”—Director Richard Franklin, on what *Link* says regarding man-ape relationships.

SYNOPSIS: In London, American zoology student Jane (Shue) becomes the assistant to eccentric anthropology professor Phillips (Stamp) at his isolated seaside cottage during a holiday recess. There she discovers that the teacher lives with three highly intelligent apes: a manservant named Link, an agitated female named Voodoo, and a baby chimp called Imp.

Professor Phillips tells Jane to always remember that she is the dominant species and not treat the apes as equals; not to let incidents escalate; always forgive the apes; and not to get involved in their squabbles, because they'll sort things out.

But then one day Link learns that the professor plans to put him down, and things do escalate. Phillips disappears from the house, and Jane is convinced that Link has murdered him. Voodoo is also discovered dead, and Jane grows more suspicious. Back in London, Jane's boyfriend David (Pinner) begins to worry about her and sets out with two friends to see what's going on, unaware that they will find a desperate Jane, who finally comes to realize that she cannot outrun Link, but must outsmart him.

COMMENTARY: Early in Richard Franklin's *Link*, a chilly scientist played with elegant pomposity by Terence Stamp tells his young student (Elisabeth Shue) that there are just a few simple rules she should obey in all of her person-to-ape social contacts. In the course of this exciting film, much as in *Gremlins*, every one of those rules gets

shattered, sometimes with surprising effect. The fun of movies that establish rules like these clearly comes in the breaking of them, so that the audience sits on pins and needles wondering what will happen next.

Franklin created a perfect little terror trap in *Link*. There's a remote countryside estate with no phones around for miles. He is economical with his characters: Most of the time it's just Shue with the apes. And more to the point, the film creates a memorable villain: a vengeful monkey named Link. But Link isn't just an attack pit bull. Like all great movie monsters, he generates a sense of pathos. He's calculating and intelligent (which makes him dangerous), yet Link is also acting according to his survival instinct. He learns that Dr. Phillips plans to have him killed and so he responds as anybody with that knowledge would. He strikes back.

For a time, once Link has gone on the attack, Shue's character, Jane, attempts to outrun the character. There's a tense P.O.V. chase as she retreats to the house from the cliff and waits for Imp to let her in. Once inside, as Jane reads Imp the story of *The Three Little Pigs*, Link circles the house attempting to find a way in, unknowingly mimicking the dynamics of the Big Bad Wolf in that story. Once Link gets inside, *Link* becomes an exhilarating chase film. There's some fantastic staging in this extended sequence, and it's positively electrifying. What separates us from the beasts is our ability to think in strategic, even devious terms, so Jane tricks Link into igniting a gas fire in the kitchen, which ultimately kills him. Seeking escape, Link climbs to the top of the house but falls into the conflagration when the roof collapses. You almost feel sorry for the little guy.

It's interesting that two movies in the second half of the 1980s, *Link* and George Romero's *Monkey Shines* (1988), attempted to tabulate the relationship between simian and man and gaze at the similarities and differences between species. Both films also bring the apes into domestic human settings—our turf!—and one senses that *Link* and *Monkey Shines*, each in its own way, suggest that perhaps apes and humans can't really get along; that critical misunderstandings occur in creatures that are so very similar, but different in some important ways.

In the course of the film, Jane (named after a character in Tarzan, perhaps?) breaks every rule of the house to prove herself the victorious final girl. Although she's the dominant species, Jane treats Link as an equal and, after accepting his intelligence, uses it against him. Likewise, Jane indeed permits matters to escalate—into a hair-

raising pursuit and violent attack. And finally, she takes sides in a personal monkey squabble. At an early juncture Imp urges Jane to kill Link, understanding what the other ape is capable of.

The monkey's got some good advice, and Jane smartly takes it.

CLOSE-UP: Monkey See, Monkey Do: *Link* was Richard Franklin's third 1980s horror film, and given its multi-species nature, quite a departure from his earlier work, *Road Games* and *Psycho II*. I asked the auteur to describe the film's genesis:

"My landlord [DP Tom Ackerman] on a spec trip in 1979 showed me the story, and I optioned it. It was to have been my next film after *Road Games*. The opening line in the synopsis: '*Someone pulled the head off Mrs. Murphy's cat.*'"

The director remembers his interest in *Link*'s main concept, "the idea that animal could be acting like a man, acting like an animal," he says. He calls the notion "an ironic spin on Michael Myers and the whole genre. Then learning from Jan Goodall there was some truth to this..."

Ray Berwick trained the apes in preparation for a shoot that Franklin remembers was "quite long," approximately fifty-four days. And the apes represented an interesting challenge to direct.

"They could do short (15–20) second behaviors. And didn't argue. But lost interest quickly. It was a grindingly difficult shoot. But not because of the apes. I found the English crew very slow and difficult."

In preparation for the exhilarating final chase, Franklin had prepared storyboards, and took a week to shoot it. "*Link* has something like three times the number of shots of any of my other movies," he notes.

I was one of the folks who found and enjoyed *Link* on video, but it wasn't easy. So I asked Mr. Franklin what happened regarding the release of the film.

"EMI went belly up," he answers. "Cannon inherited the film and those guys were absolute bozos. It had a small theatrical airing."

Critical Reception

“Mann’s visual style is fascinating—a mix of neo-noir Expressionism, the near abstract contemplation of architectural space and how people inhabit them, and cold versus hot colors. The use of sudden, striking (often symmetrical) compositions of geometric arrangements recalls Argento and the giallo film’s preoccupation with other realms of psychology perception beneath the everyday.”—Robert Cettl, *Serial Killer Cinema: An Analytical Filmography*, McFarland and Company, 2003.

“The fact that Hannibal Lecter (or Lektor in this film) didn’t quite become a cultural icon until *Silence of the Lambs* perhaps makes this film something of a misfire, but it’s a good misfire. Brian Cox portrays Hannibal as an erudite, somewhat intense and certainly crafty killer, where Anthony Hopkins would portray him as something larger than life. Joan Allen gives her typical top-notch performance as Dollarhyde’s blind potential girlfriend, and Iron Butterfly makes for a truly memorable and stylish ultimate freak-out scene. Michael Mann was still growing as a director, perhaps with more style than substance, but this film held up pretty well until *Red Dragon* went more faithful to Harris’s novel and brought Hopkins along with him, all but negating the existence of *Manhunter*. Mann can sometimes raise so-so material to something special (as in *Heat*) and can also take good material and turn it into crap (as in *The Keep*)—this film was somewhere in the middle. Tom Noonan was perfectly cast, perhaps better in the role than Ralph Fiennes in *Red Dragon*, but let’s call this for what it is: If *Silence of the Lambs* had never come out, we’d probably all think much more of *Manhunter*. It’s still better than Ridley Scott’s *Hannibal*.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

“A very underrated movie, it’s one of the first to feature an FBI profiler. Tom Noonan gives a great performance as killer Francis Dollarhyde, and I liked director Michael Mann’s use of ‘psychovision,’ where we get to see the world through the killer’s eyes.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: William Peterson (Will Graham); Kim Greist (Molly Graham); Dennis Farina (Jack Crawford); Joan Allen (Reba); Brian Cox (Dr. Hannibal Lektor); Stephen Lang (Freddy Lounds); Tom Noonan (Francis Dollarhyde); Chris Elliott (Zeller); Benjamin Hendrickson (Dr. Chilton); Robin Moseley (Sarah); Paul Perri (Dr. Sidney Bloom); Frankie Faison (Fisk); Michael D. Roberts (The Runner); Bill

Smitrovich (Lloyd Bowman).

CREW: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group presents a Richard Roth production, a Michael Mann film. *Casting:* Bonnie Timmerman. *Original Music:* The Reds and Michel Rubini. *Film Editor:* Dov Hoenig. *Director of Photography:* Dante Spinotti. *Executive Producer:* Bernie Williams. *Stunt Coordinator:* Bud Davis. *Produced by:* Richard Roth. *Based on the novel “Red Dragon” by:* Thomas Harris. *Directed by:* Michael Mann. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 119 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The retired criminal profiler who captured mad serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lektor (Box) is asked by his friend at the F.B.I., Jack Crawford (Farina), to profile a new threat, a murderer who selects innocent suburban families and kills them according to the lunar cycle. Although Will Graham (Peterson) is a family man who is still recovering from a nervous breakdown, he agrees to profile the new killer (Noonan), dubbed “The Tooth Fairy” by the press.

Graham visits with Dr. Lektor in his cell, hoping to get the feeling of a predator once again, but the wily madman is able to get a message out to the Tooth Fairy consisting of Graham’s home address, an action which sends the family into hiding. With the help of a yellow journalist, Freddy Lounds (Lang), Graham conceives a sting to catch the Tooth Fairy, but it goes badly wrong. Lounds is murdered by the psycho.

While Graham visits the crime scenes of the first two massacres and time counts down till the next full moon, he attempts to get into the head of his new opponent, determining that how the killer sees—and dreams—may be the key to catching him. Meanwhile, the Tooth Fairy, a man named Francis Dollarhyde, befriends and romances a sweet blind woman (Allen) who has no idea that she is in danger.

COMMENTARY: In 2007, the “profiler” subgenre is a virtual cliché, as is the notion of its lead character, a man or woman who can “see inside” the mind of a serial killer ... usually at great risk. It’s been done to death in movies like *Copycat* (1995) and *Switchback* (1997), and on TV programs such as *The X-Files*, *Millennium* and *Profiler*. Even the reality-based series *The F.B.I. Files* and *Forensic Files* have focused on the fashion in which law enforcement officials hunt predators in our modern society with a blend of psychology and forensic science. It’s only a slight exaggeration to say that a pioneer in this format was Michael Mann’s brilliant 1986 film, *Manhunter*, the production that introduced the world to the character of Hannibal Lector ... or Lektor, as he is named here. The actor playing the famous madman is Brian

However, a soon-to-be-iconic madman is not the reason that *Manhunter* thrives as a suspense, horror film, and as a work of art. Rather, Mann has created a film wherein the form (the visuals) reflects the contents of Thomas Harris's story (from the novel *Red Dragon*). In other words, mise-en-scene, production design, and the film's color palette reveal as much about the characters and their respective worlds as does the dialogue.

Manhunter focuses on a man named Will Graham. He is a protector, a Holden Caulfield character who, like that character in *Catcher in the Rye*, sees it as his job to rescue others from going over the cliff at the end of a field of rye. In this case, Graham protects society from its most fearsome predators and does so by coming to understand those predators. Graham's function as defender of innocence is made clear in a scene set at the beach behind his home in Florida. With his son's help, he constructs a fenced-in pen in the sand for some threatened turtles. At the end of the film, he checks on these turtles, finds them well, and declares that "most of them made it," a statement that clearly reflects his victory over Dollarhyde. The serial killer and predator destroyed two innocent families in their "pens" (their modernistic homes), but was at least stopped before more innocents could suffer. Society, as a whole, goes on, because Graham protected it.

Manhunter sets up an interesting dynamic in depicting Graham's world. The film constantly equates Graham with nature and with goodness, contrasting that with man's cities and constructs, where sickness thrives. Graham is first seen in the film sitting on the shore, the ocean rolling in behind him. Later, his bedroom is revealed through the choice of color (a deep azure) to be a reflection of that scene. Giant, wall-sized windows look out on the sea, again fostering a connection with natural elements.

This beautiful location of beaches and ocean (and baby turtles) is simultaneously the paradise that Graham has "earned" through his battle and capture of Lector, and the "exile" that keeps him from his life's calling: hunting the men who prey on the innocent in America's cities.

After Graham meets with Lector for the first time in the film, in an unnaturally white and pristine cell—a false sanctuary, as the film proves, since Hannibal can use the telephone to reach out and "touch" Graham's loved ones—he flees in horror from the thought that he and

Lektor could be two sides of the same coin. He leaves the cell and finds his panic growing as he finds himself in an even more unreal, modernist setting (actually an art museum in Atlanta). He accelerates his pace and flees the building, and it is only once he's outside—staring at green grass (another image of nature, like the beach)—that he starts to calm down. To find himself and escape the twisted people in this society, Graham must re-connect with nature. Mann's camera cuts to the lawn at least twice in this sequence to establish Graham's need to ground himself in the earth again, and escape the artificial confines of man's world.

Choices in color palette and design impact *Manhunter* throughout its running time. When Graham performs a walk-through of the Leeds house—a crime scene—the same immaculate white is depicted in the bedroom as is in Lector's cell later. Only here, that white is marred by disordered patterns of red splotches, human blood spilled there. This is the impact Lektor would like to have on his surroundings too, and the idea is that man has set himself up in perfectly ordered, modernist homes, believing he is safe, but that predators exist who will mar this seeming perfection and destroy it (as the walls are destroyed by the blood).

It's no accident or coincidence that the victim homes in *Manhunter* share in common the design of Lector's prison, all intensely modernist and coldly clinical in presentation. There's a coldness and sharpness that separates them from nature. The film is trying to say that modern life is cold, and perhaps it is these harsh designs, these right angles, that have created monsters like Dollarhyde and Lektor.

Dollarhyde's home is the third piece of this puzzle. Much of his home, particularly the kitchen (where he almost kills Joan Allen's Reba), is fashioned in a sickly, neon green. It's a bright color, but an unpleasant one, as though the immaculate white has been put into shadow by Dollarhyde's sick soul. The color reveals that Dollarhyde is an unsavory character, and the audience immediately feels unease in his presence. That something is wrong with him is plain not just from his behavior, but his very environs.

Manhunter thematically and visually focuses on the idea of what is seen and detected. Dollarhyde places mirror shards into the eyes of the victims, so they will see and adore him. He chooses his victims (all suburban families) based on what he has seen in home movies. Similarly, Graham is able to get into Dollarhyde's head—to see what the killer sees—by studying his hunting grounds, modern, cold suburbia. The film reflects this leitmotif about sight but carefully

crafts visuals that hint at the competing worlds. Graham's is natural and serene (cool blue); society builds itself in clean whites in an effort to exert control, security and normalcy; and Dollarhyde dwells in sickly, vomit-like green, a reflection of the bile he feels inside, his need to kill and destroy.

A neon and neo-noir, *Manhunter* is a brilliantly cinematic movie, crafted by Mann to make full, breathtaking use of the frame. Much more than a police procedural, this is a movie about an alienated American society, where monsters breed in secret, and those who catch them must give up "innocence" to do so. This meditation on alienation, on the dark, empty spaces that keep men from really "knowing" each other, also reflects its themes in the film's carefully crafted sound design. *Manhunter* allows gaps in the dialogue—long silences—and these create a foreboding distancing mood, especially when the atmospheric music is layered in.

In the film's final battle, Dollarhyde actually emerges from Mars (a wall-sized poster, anyway) in one incredible cut, another sign of his literal "alienation" in the community, and his battle with the cops is heightened, almost to the point of insanity, through repeated footage, jump cuts, and the rock 'n' roll tune (by Iron Butterfly) "In a Gadda Da Vida." In a film that obsesses so much on what and how the audience sees, it's a critical distinction that the ending seems to go nuts like this. The worlds of the predator and the lawmen have collided, at last, and the rapid-fire cutting and expressionist techniques make the fury of this clash a palpable thing.

The Silence of the Lambs (1991) is better-known than *Manhunter*, and much decorated too, having won a slew of Academy Awards. Yet, in many of the ways that matter, *Manhunter* is more than its equal in terms of its artistic crafting and visual skill. Hannibal Lector is not the bogeyman he would become later, but in *Manhunter* he still serves a critical purpose, reminding Will Graham that there's a fine line dividing predator and protector, and that he must be ever vigilant, lest he cross it.

"It feels good," Lector tells Graham, explaining the motivation to kill. God has power, and if one does what God does, he also has the power. Although Dollarhyde seems to be named after a famous alter ego (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), *Manhunter* makes it abundantly clear that Lector is Graham's dark side, a physical manifestation of the anger within the lawman. He can either use it to protect, or to destroy. Graham makes his choice in the film, and because both he and the film boast the gift of "insight," that choice is an optimistic one.

LEGACY: Hannibal Lector (or Lector) returned in a series of highly popular films starring Anthony Hopkins. *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Hannibal* (2000) were new stories involving the mass murderer, but *Red Dragon* (2001) was a rather less successful remake of the *Red Dragon* story, which had already been dramatized so successfully in *Manhunter*.

Maximum Overdrive

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“One of the worst horror movies of the decade...”—Stephen Prince. *History of the American Cinema: A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electric Rainbow, 1981–1989*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000, page 303.

“Hate it all you want, Stephen King made a movie that’s brainless and fun. AC/DC music made for an interesting score, and a game cast made this overblown *Twilight Zone–Night of the Living Dead* with machines a lot of fun. King himself doesn’t speak highly of it, and it’s made plenty of the worst films of the year/decade/ever lists, but for what it is, it’s fun. King doesn’t necessarily leave us thinking he was a novelist who should be making movies (Nicholas Meyer and William Peter Blatty are good examples of writers who are pretty talented in the director’s chair), but it’s not nearly as bad as people say.”—William Latham, author *Eternity Unbound, Mary’s Monster, Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Emilio Estevez (William “Billy” Robertson); Pat Hingle (Hendershott); Laura Harrington (Brett); Yeardley Smith (Connie); John Short (Curtis); Ellen McElduff (Wanda); J.C. Quinn (Duncan); Christopher Murney (Loman); Holter Graham (Duke); Frankie Faison (Handy); Pat Miller (Joe); Jack Canon (Max); Barry Bell (Steve); John Brasington (Franki); J. Don Ferguson (Andy); Leon Rippy (Brad).

CREW: Dino De Laurentiis presents a film by Stephen King. *Costume Designer:* Clifford Capone. *Production Designer:* Giorgio Postiglione. *Film Editor:* Evan Lottman. *Director of Photography:* Armando Nannuzzi. *Stunt Coordinator:* Glenn Randall, Jr. *Music:* AC/DC. *Executive Producers:* Mel Pearl, Don Levine. *Producer:* Martha Schumacher. *Written and Directed by:* Stephen King. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On June 19, 1987, at 9:47 am, Earth passes through the tail of Rhea-M, a rogue comet, and suddenly all of man's machinery goes haywire—everything from soda machines and electric knives to ATM machines and trucks. The situation in Wilmington, N.C. is especially grave for a diverse group of employees and customers at the Dixie Boy Diner and Gas Station.

Among those trapped there, surrounded by a convoy of malevolent trucks, are an ex-convict short-order cook named Billy (Estevez), a hitchhiker named Brett (Harrington) and nervous newlyweds Connie (Smith) and Curtis (Short). Things look up when Billy discovers an illegal weapon cache in the truck stop basement and the survivors can arm themselves with machine guns and rocket launchers. But even then, it's a losing war, since the sentient machines also control electricity and other vital survival functions. Billy and the others decide to make for a small island six miles off the North Carolina coast where vehicles aren't allowed. Before they can escape, however, a military vehicle arrives and demands (through Morse code honked on its horn) that the humans begin feeding the trucks additional fuel for their rampage. Billy speculates that this machine warfare may be an alien race's prelude to colonization.

COMMENTARY: There's something to be said for a movie that boasts no sense of tact or decorum whatsoever, especially if that film happens to be a horror picture. Stephen King's *Maximum Overdrive* (based on his short story, "Trucks") is a much-maligned, in-your-face demolition derby, a full-throttle entry into the "siege" film sweepstakes, a subgenre highlighted by such classics as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976).

What differentiates King's film (a self-described "moron movie") is that he doesn't reach for social sub-text (like the Romero films), or even grasp at a feeling of camaraderie among the victims (like Carpenter's effort). Instead, director King just blows things up real good, and the result is a hard-driving horror flick (with a pulse-pounding score from AC/DC) that comes at the viewer like a psycho with a baseball bat.

The no-subtlety approach has the double effect of being both gross *and* funny. It's an amusing cavalcade of chaos as the world goes to hell in a handbasket. Standing at an ATM machine as the machines become sentient, a pissy customer (played by Stephen King) is told by the monitor that he's an asshole, and a ticker goes by overhead spelling out "Fuck You."

From there, things get violent, not merely vulgar. Coffee machines spit coffee cups, a gas-station pump spits diesel in a fella's eyes, a little kid is crushed by a bulldozer, and an electric knife slices a waitress's arm. It's as though Christine the evil car has evolved, and King gets unfettered joy out of staging this initial—and very impressive—mechanical onslaught. Even a lawnmower eventually goes bad. *Maximum Overdrive*, while making a point about modern America's dependence on its technology, also walks the line between extreme gore and campy humor. I say, bravo! Bring it on!

King's characters are ridiculously two-dimensional, but I'm going to go out on a limb here and saying that's precisely what he intended. Pat Hingle, replete with a missile launcher, is a bigoted, redneck villain. Emilio Estevez is the down-on-his-luck bad boy who—to the surprise of no one—"makes love like a hero."

And then, saving the best for last, there's Yeardley Smith's mousy character, Connie, who screams and screams and then screams some more. Connie screams so much you want to strangle her, but she's also funny, and the movie has a wicked good time putting her in jeopardy again and again. Let's face it, King is the mastermind behind *The Dead Zone*, *Christine* and other films that have fully developed, human characters. That wasn't the game here. Instead, he's having fun, playing with horror clichés, and having a good time.

Maximum Overdrive is no masterpiece. The final credits reveal that the invasion of the machines was stopped by a Russian weather satellite that destroyed the alien UFO. Well, now, isn't a weather satellite a machine too? Why didn't the UFO co-opt that machine? Furthermore, a Russian "killer satellite" (a big bugaboo in the 1980s) would presumably be controlled by Mission Control, wouldn't it? More machines, right?

Also, *Maximum Overdrive* doesn't get around to explaining why some cars go postal and others remain fine, helpful conveyances. I can explain it, however: Some cars *had* to remain in human hands so King could stage car chases and crashes. It's that simple.

Finally, King has such a good time with his fiery explosions and stunts (all of which are very impressive) that he forgets to pepper in some suspense when the evil Green Goblin, Happy Toyz Truck gets destroyed in the finale. Our nemesis is struck by a rocket, and its inhuman eyes go dark, but there's no adrenaline rush from the elimination of the villain's "face" in the film. It just happens, and then, boom, the movie moves on.

Why did critics respond so hatefully to a fun, intentionally over-the-top horror movie? Here are three reasons, and they all have to do with Stephen King: He's rich, he's talented, and he's loved by millions (if not billions!). No offense to my critical brethren out there, but movie critics *love* to take down guys like King. Just witness the rise and fall of Kevin Costner and Ben Affleck. One day, they're cock of the walk, the next day a feather duster, to quote *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. Anyway, at the time of its release, the critics wildly exaggerated *Maximum Overdrive*'s flaws, and tried very hard not to get the joke. The worst horror film of the decade? Not by a long shot. Check out *Home Sweet Home* or *Neon Maniacs*.

***Neon Maniacs* ½**



Cast and Crew

CAST: Allan Hayes (Steven); Leilani Sarelle (Natalie); Donna Locke (Paula); Victor Elliot Brandt (Devin); David Muir (Wylie); Marta Kober (Lorraine); P.R. Paul (Eugene); Jeff Tyler (Wally); Amber Austin (Lisa); James Atcheson (Ray); Chuck Hemingway (Gary); Bo Sabato (Manello); Jessie Lawrence Ferguson (Carson); John La Fayette (Thomas); Gene Bicknell (Cozzie); Katherine Heard (Sue); Mark Allen (Ape); Scott McKenna (Archer); Douglas Markell and James H. Smith (Axe); Mark Twogood (Decapitator); Andrew Divoff (Doc); Robert F. Veilliux (Hangman); Scott Guetzkow and Robert E. Veilliux (Juice); Chuck Cohen (Mohawk); Zac Baldwin (Punk Rocker); Solly Mark (Samurai); Jerome L. Dennae (Scavenger); Daniel Burrelli (Slasher); Alan Aperlo (Soldier).

CREW: Steven Mackler Presents a Cimmaron Production of a Joseph Mangine Film. *Film Editor:* Timothy Snell. *Directors of Photography:* Oliver Wood, Joseph Mangine. *Music Score:* Kendall Schmidt. *Music Producers:* Murri Barber, Michael Gusick. *Special Visual Makeup Effects Designed and Created by:* Makeup Effects Labs, Allan A. Apone, Douglas J. White. *Mechanical Effects:* Image Engineering. *Costume Design:* Joseph Porro. *Casting:* Paul Bengston, David Cohn. *Extras Casting:* Christal Blue Casting Mark Twogood. *Associate Producers:* Herb Linsey, Brian Arandjelovich, Edwin Picker, Brian Leonard. *Executive Producers:* Frank Dominguez Bernard E. Goldberg. *Written by:* Mark Patrick Carducci. *Producers:* Steven Mackler, Christopher Arnold. *Songs "Baby Lied" and "The Choice You Made" by Rick Bowles. "We Had Enough" by*

Split Sydney. Directed by: Joseph Mangine. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “When the world is ruled by violence, and the soul of mankind fades, the children’s path will be darkened by the shadow of the neon maniacs.”—The cryptic opening narration of Joseph Mangine’s *Neon Maniacs*.

SYNOPSIS: Natalie (Sarelle) and her high school friends spend a night carousing in a park in San Francisco, Natalie alone surviving an attack from a band of murderous and heavily armed inhuman creatures. Nobody, including the police, believes her strange tale, except for the grocery boy, a singer named Steven (Hayes) and aspiring young horror filmmaker Paula (Locke).

Paula tracks the maniacal killers to their lair under the Golden Gate Bridge and learns that the only thing that can kill them is water. Meanwhile, the maniacs chase Steven and Natalie through the subway and on a bus. Steve decides the best plan to defeat the monsters is to lure them to the high school’s battle of the bands, and arm all the students with squirt guns. There he performs “Baby Lied” and other songs on stage, while the creatures infiltrate the masquerade dance and start killing students. Paula arms herself with a fire hose and opens fire on the monsters, leading to a battle royale in the halls of the high school.

COMMENTARY: Ever wonder what happened to the Village People after their premiere movie, Nancy Walker’s camp classic, *Can’t Stop the Music* (1980), bombed? I submit that the members of the group were actually transformed into ... the Neon Maniacs! The monstrous mutants highlighted in this exceedingly bad horror film all boast signature costumes—just like the boys in the Village People—and suspiciously, many of those costumes overlap. There’s an Indian Neon Maniac and an Indian Village Person; there’s a biker Neon Maniac and a biker Village Person. There’s even a soldier in each gang. So what’s going on here? Separated at birth or evil twins? You make the call...

What’s really happening here is a rotten, unintentionally hilarious movie about a bunch of intrepid teens combating a death squad of costumed monsters. In an example of the film’s superior sense of logic, the Neon Maniacs—who can only be killed by water—set up their new headquarters at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge *near water!*

Alas, the film’s insipid final girl, a character named Natalie, doesn’t reveal much more sense than do the Neon Maniacs. In what may be

the shortest period of mourning in over a century of cinema history, Natalie decides to go swimming in her backyard pool by moonlight ... only hours after she witnessed all of her friends being shot, cut up and generally butchered in the park. Naturally, the Neon Maniacs follow her there. Continuing her extensive period of mourning, Natalie agrees to go out with a new boyfriend the next day. Again, this is barely twenty-four hours after her best friend Lisa has been murdered before Natalie's eyes.

New boyfriend Steve's master plan is to battle heavily armed monsters with squirt guns. And, instead of doing it somewhere out of the way, like a quarry or a parking lot, or even a park, he decides the time and place for the confrontation is the high school Battle of the Bands celebration! This not only assures that the Neon Maniacs will kill lots of his high school cohorts (and they do), but that, in addition, the movie's audience will get treated to Steve's terrible crooning. Maybe he had a back-up plan; maybe his compositions, like "Baby Lied" and the appropriately titled "We Had Enough," were composed to be used in tandem with the squirt guns.

As lethal weapons.

Speaking of lethal weapons, it appears that many of the students at the Battle of the Bands didn't receive the memo about using water guns, because few of 'em actually fight back with the weaponry. Instead, they're picked off with ease ... and the terror continues.

And what a sense of timing this young hero Steve boasts. After the maniacs have attacked the school (an attack he basically orchestrated by insisting on the Battle of the Bands and making it the final stand), he realizes that this is the opportunity to relieve Natalie of her virginity. Great guy, that Steve-O. After the shortest mourning period in movie history, Natalie thus participates in what must be the worst-timed sex scene. A movie without a single moment of intentional levity, *Neon Maniacs* is a failure in so many regards, it's frankly difficult to catalog everything.

The sets are also terrible. Early on the film visits the bedroom of a young mask maker and horror movie fan. He has stills of Dracula and *Alien*, and posters for *Gremlins* and *Blade Runner*, all over the walls. But there are bare shelves too, with only one or two toys on each shelf ... as though the set was assembled with no forethought, at the very last minute.

This review could go on and on. One might meditate about the editing

that seems to have been conducted by someone with attention deficit disorder, or the acting, which is amateurish, to be polite. One could even make note of the bizarre voiceover in the middle of the film that insists that Natalie should go home from school for a while. It's a nice explanation, but why? As it stands, and transmitted over a long shot, it's as though God is excusing Natalie from class. Like so much of the movie, it makes perilously little sense.

And—please—what's with the title, *Neon Maniacs*? The maniac part is quite understandable. These are vicious monsters (who wear very well-maintained costumes, by the way) and one can see how victims might consider them maniacs. But neon? Why neon? By definition, neon is “an inert, gaseous element occurring in the atmosphere to the extent of 18 parts per million, and used in display and television tubes.”

For the record, there's no neon involved with these maniacs. At all. It would be different if their costumes had neon tubes or lighting on them, but they don't. It's just another bizarre and perplexing aspect of the film.

Yet the unkindest cut of all is the director's insistence on featuring a raft of poorly performed musical numbers. That's why horror fans rent this movie no doubt; to see the battle of the bands at some high school in California in 1986. Right? Because featuring musical numbers in a horror flick worked out so well in *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed Up Zombies*.

“Steven, is this ever gonna end?” Natalie whines at one point in the action. Unfortunately, one of Steve's responses comes in the form of another song, one boasting the telltale lyrics “Let Me Ruin Your Evening...”

Which is sure to be the result if you watch this movie.

Night of the Creeps

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jason Lively (Chris Romero); Steve Marshall (James Carpenter Hooper); Jill Whitlow (Cynthia Cronenberg); Tom Atkins (Detective Cameron); Wally Taylor (Detective Landis); Bruce Solomon (Sergeant Raimi); Vic Polizos (Coroner); Allan J. Kayser (The Bradster); Ken

Heron (Johnny); Alice Cadogan (Pam); June Harris (Karen); David Paymer (Young Scientist); David Oliver (Steve); Evelyn Smith (House Mother); Ivan E. Roth (Psycho Zombie); Todd Bryant (Informative Student); Dick Miller (Armorer).

CREW: Tri-Star Pictures Presents a Charles Gordon Production of a Fred Dekker Film. *Casting:* Ilene Starger. *Music:* Barry De Vorzon. *Film Editor:* Michael N. Knue. *Production Designer:* George Costello. *Art Director:* Mario Caso. *Director of Photography:* Robert C. New. *Executive Producer:* William Finnegan. *Producer:* Charles Gordon. *Makeup Effects and Creeps design by:* David B. Miller. *Special Visual Effects:* David Stipes Productions, Inc. *Written and Directed by:* Fred Dekker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “What is this, a homicide or a bad B-movie?”— Detective Cameron (Tom Atkins) arrives at a crime scene during the tongue-in-cheek Fred Dekker film, *Night of the Creeps*.

SYNOPSIS: In 1959, a strange alien cylinder containing a deadly experiment— brain-eating slugs—crashed to Earth near Corman University. A young co-ed was infected with a slug when one jumped into his mouth, and put into cryogenic freeze. Where he remains...

Years later, during pledge week 1986, two self-described “lame-oids,” Chris (Lively) and J.C. (Marshall), have been instructed to find a body and dump it on the steps of a rival fraternity if they wish to join the prestigious Beta Fraternity. They sneak into an experimental lab and un-thaw the infected boy from 1959, generating a reign of terror as the brain-eating slugs begin to attack the college students.

Detective Cameron (Atkins), whose catchphrase is “Thrill me,” detects the strange link between the alien slugs and an axe murderer who was also on the loose in 1959, and who killed Cameron’s high school sweetheart. When J.C. is infected with the alien menace, Detective Cameron, Chris and psychology student Cynthia (Whitlow) join forces to stop an army of the infected dead on the night of the big formal.

COMMENTARY: *Night of the Creeps* is a fun wish-fulfillment horror movie from Fred Dekker, who also directed *The Monster Squad*. He’s graduated from middle school to college with this material, and he laces his amusing and scary film with a number of homages to horror movie directors and films.

Night of the Creeps concerns a geek, Chris Romero (after George), who becomes a hero, gets the girl, Cynthia Cronenberg (after David), and

even gets to blow away jocks. That's right, those evil frat boys become slug-infested zombies, and the hero destroys them. How many of us have longed to do that, over the years?

Tom Atkins gets another great horror movie role, a detective so hard-boiled that his opening line in every scene is always a bored "Thrill me." And then, he speaks the single greatest line of dialogue uttered in a 1980s horror movie, the one that grants this movie a three star ranking all on its own. He runs into a sorority house, pursued by the fraternity zombies, and tells the preening young ladies who are expecting corsages and tuxes: "Girls, the good news is: Your dates are here. The bad news is: They're dead."

That's also the movie's ad-line and it's delivered with deadpan skill by Atkins, who also voices the classic line, "What is this, a homicide or a bad B movie?" You have to love a movie with a sense of humor like that. Though I could do without all the allusions and "homage" to Roger Corman (Corman University), Sam Raimi (Sgt. Raimi) and John Landis (Detective Landis), the film gets just about everything else right. It's disgusting when it should be, funny when it should be, and there's even a little bit of genuine pathos when Chris loses his best friend, J.C. There may even be some subtext here, about best friends and roommates eventually losing favor to the beautiful girlfriend, but this isn't a movie really concerned with such things.

Night of the Creeps also includes powerful villains: the creepy leech parasites, which jump in to prospective symbionts through the mouth, lay eggs in the brain, and let their hosts walk around for a while as the eggs incubate. It's a disgusting reproductive process, and Dekker mines it for all its worth, particularly in a sequence wherein a character is trapped in the rest room as the slugs race about on the floor outside a stall.

Night of the Creeps features the cliché of the always-eating medical examiner, the requisite cat jolt, the breast part of the movie, and even an appearance by old stalwart Dick Miller. The opening scene plays like a variation on the original *The Blob*, and the end re-stages *Night of the Living Dead* with fraternity jocks. The film hops from set piece to set piece in lively fashion with funny dialogue, and the sense of behind-the-scenes fun is palpable. If not a classic, *Night of the Creeps* is a ghoulish good time, and one that occasionally reaches beyond its wish-fulfillment template. Depending on the scene, it'll touch the funny bone or the heart strings.

Nomads

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“It’s the sort of enigmatic mind game one expects to encounter at a highfalutin European film festival, maybe on a double bill with a Robert Altman or Roman Polanski movie about schizoid urban dwellers.”—Glenn Lovell, “*Nomads Leaves Audience Wandering*,” *San Jose Mercury News*, April 14, 1986, page 11B.

“[A] thriller both stylish and fresh.”—Rick Kogan, “*Nomads Overcomes its Built-in Flaws with Spirit, Evil and Otherwise*,” *The Chicago Tribune*, March 7, 1986.

“[A] gripping, atmospheric little horror tale told with a certain nightmarish intelligence.”—Eleanor Ringel, “*Pierce Brosnan’s Nomads* an effective little horror film,” *The Atlanta Journal*, May 15, 1986, page C/11.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lesley Anne Down (Eileen Flax); Pierce Brosnan (Pommier); Anna-Marie Monticelli (Niki); Frances Bray (Bertril); Jeannie Elias (Cassie); Alan Autry (Okla); Adam Ant (Number One); Josie Cotton (Silver Ring); Frank Doubleday (Razors); Hector Mercado (Pony Tail); Mary Woronov (Dancing Mary); Nina Foch (Real Estate Agent); Paul Anselmo (Cop); Josee Beaudry (Nurse).

CREW: *Presented by*: Elliott Kastner in association with Cinema 7. *Associate Producer*: Stanley Mark. *Production Designer*: Marcia Hinds. *Director of Photography*: Steven Ramsey. *Film Editor*: Michael John Bateman. *Music*: Bill Conti. *Special Guitar Performances by*: Ted Nugent. “*Strangers, Nomads, Dancing Mary*” *words and music by*: Bill Conti, Ted Nugent. *Executive Producer*: Jerry Gershwin. *Producer*: Georgie Pappas, Cassion Elwes. *Directed by*: John McTiernan. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Babbling, bloodied and bruised, a French anthropologist named Pommier (Brosnan) is admitted to a Los Angeles hospital, where he bites Dr. Eileen Flax (Down) on her ear just before dying suddenly.

Over a period of days, Flax begins to experience strange hallucinations, actually Pommier’s memories. She follows the footsteps he took in his last days, learning how Pommier ran across a

strange group of menacing urban gang members, really hostile Innuat spirits called Nomads who bring disaster and madness to any human who falls in with them. Pommier died before he could save his wife, Niki, from the dangerous Nomads. Now a confused Flax finds herself coming to the rescue, as the strange roving gang closes in for the kill.

COMMENTARY: John McTiernan, who later helmed *Predator* (1987) and *Die Hard* (1988), began his directing career with the enigmatic but mesmerizing *Nomads*, a phantasm-like film that finds a pre-James Bond Pierce Brosnan feeling an odd “pull” to join a band of supernatural punks, a wolf pack of sorts.

Brosnan plays Pommier, a French anthropologist whose thrill in life is discovering and photographing strange wildlife. He unexpectedly finds wildlife of the supernatural variety in Los Angeles, a gang of thugs that others don’t seem to detect in their midst. Pommier obsessively photographs these nomads, studies their habits and is consumed with the urge to learn more. As if to suggest that Pommier has become trapped by his compulsion to comprehend these strangers, McTiernan’s stages several shots of Brosnan bracketed by door frames, or in tight shot, his space in compositions limited. “What are you after?” Pommier’s wife asks him, and the audience suspects even Pommier doesn’t know for sure.



Pondering evil. Pierce Brosnan, right, and Lesley-Anne Down in a quiet moment from John McTiernan's *Nomads* (1986).

What the nomads truly want, and what the final shots of the film verify, is that these odd spirits are fully aware of Brosnan during the whole film and in fact may have traveled to Los Angeles just to waylay him. What the Nomads seek is clear: a new member in their ranks. One of *Nomads*' final and most haunting images is a glimpse of Pommier without a home, doomed to live without love and wander for eternity.

Nomads is a moody and bizarre effort, one that finds Pommier's history and experience passed on to a doctor, played by Lesley Anne Down. That's not all he passes on, and the film broaches a lesbian scene between Down (now possessed after a fashion by Pommier) and his mourning wife.

"Did you ever have a dream and not know when it started?" Pommier asks his wife, and that's the film's most cogent explanation of the narrative. There's something sleepy and surreal about *Nomads*. It's not a hard action flick, though it climaxes with a violent house siege by the Nomads, and it's not exactly scary either. It's like a half-imagined thought, one that hangs in the air for a time, and then slips away. Half understood. But interesting to reflect on.

Poltergeist II: The Other Side

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Another pointless sequel made palatable by some jolting state-of-the-art special effects and a still-very-likable family. Be warned that an actor receives billing as The Vomit Creature."—Leonard Maltin, *Leonard Maltin's 2003 Movie & Video Guide*, Signet 2003, page 1093.

"[It] sorely misses the touch of executive producer Steven Spielberg and director Tobe Hooper and fails to capture the spirit (so-to-speak) of the original. On the bright side, *Poltergeist II* has some good things going for it. There's the nugget of an interesting story, a couple (but only that many) good special-effect shock sequences, and a solid, wasted performance by Craig T. Nelson."—Martin Moynihan, "Poltergeist II: Sequel Fails to Capture That Certain Spirit," *The Times*

"This time around, things were a little creepy and not quite as overblown. Julian Beck is downright creepy as the skeletal Kane, and a back story begins falling into place that helps give a little substance to the story. It's always nice seeing Will Sampson getting a part in a Hollywood film. Other than that, highly polished crap is still crap."—William Latham, author *Eternity Unbound, Mary's Monster, Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jo Beth Williams (Diane Freeling); Craig T. Nelson (Steven Freeling); Heather O'Rourke (Carol Ann); Oliver Robbins (Robbie); Will Sampson (Taylor); Julian Beck (Reverend Kane); Zelda Rubinstein (Tangina); Geraldine Fitzgerald (Grandma); John Whitecloud (Old Indian); Noble Craig (Vomit Creature); Susan Peretz (Daughter); Helen Boll (Mother); Kelly Jean Peters (Young Joss); Jaclyn Bernstein (Young Diane).

CREW: A Freddie Fields Presentation, a Victor-Grais Production. *Casting:* Joseph D'Agosta. *Associate Producer:* Lynn Arost. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Richard Edlund. *Film Editor:* Thom Noble. *Production Designer:* Ted Haworth. *Director of Photography:* Andrew Laszlo. *Executive Producer:* Freddie Fields. *Creatures Created by:* Steve Johnson, Randall William Cook. *Conceptual Artist:* H.R. Giger. *Chief Matte Artist:* Matt Yuricich. *Written and produced by:* Mark Victor, Michael Grais. *Directed by:* Brian Gibson. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: One year after their home was destroyed by angry spirits at Cuesta Verde, the Freeling family is living on the verge of bankruptcy with Diane's mother (Fitzgerald), who is tutoring young Carol Anne (O'Rourke) in the use of her rapidly-developing psychic powers. Tangina (Rubinstein) and an Indian medicine man named Taylor (Sampson) comb through the caverns beneath Cuesta Verde and find one filled with corpses belonging to an almost-two hundred year old cult led by the malevolent Reverend Kane (Beck). Kane kept his people underground because he feared an apocalypse, but he never let them leave. Now, he is holding them back from the eternal light, and hopes to use Carol Anne as a distraction. While Taylor teaches Steven (Nelson) to combat Kane, the ghoulish reverend tries to get his hands on Carol Anne once more, attacking her brother Robbie and making his teeth braces go wild, and even possessing Steven briefly. When Diane and Carol Anne are zapped to "the other side" by Kane,

Steven and Robbie must follow into the nether realm and vanquish Kane once and for all.

COMMENTARY: *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* is an inferior sequel to Tobe Hooper's eighties classic, *Poltergeist*. Yet, despite a massive influx of schmaltz and sentimentality (a Spielberg holdover, perhaps), the film doesn't register as a complete loss, and at times is genuinely scary. Prime among this sequel's assets is the casting of the elderly Julian Beck as a villainous spirit, Reverend Kane. Unlike the ethereal wisps and furious lightning bolts of many optical ghosts, Reverend Kane provides a sizzling touch of the macabre.

The finest and most chilling scene comes midway through the film as Reverend Kane, a whisper-thin old man, walks up the driveway to the Freeling house and knocks on the front door. He is met by Steve Freeling, again played by expert everyman, Craig T. Nelson, and only a screen door separates the characters. "I believe you're in trouble," Kane tells him by way of introduction, with a charming lilt, just barely Southern-accented.

Mistaken for a Christian solicitor at first, Kane grows ever more demanding, and through the filter of the screen door the camera gets its first good look at this specter. He has a big mouth filled with abnormally white teeth, waxy lips, and sunken eye sockets. His white hair is patchy, and his eyes bear the zeal and fire of pure evil. Importantly, this isn't makeup or prosthetics: This is Julian Beck, fighting cancer, at the end of his life. Like some kind of demonic Iago, Kane then begins to whisper poison in Steven's ears. "They don't trust you any more," he warns, knowing precisely what scares his opponent. "You're not man enough to hold this family together."

The hypnotic spell of this sequence—which acknowledges death in a most disturbing way, by seeing it plain in a human face—is broken after too brief a moment. Yet there's something powerful in this confrontation, from the staging and use of the screen door to the nature of the participants. Without exaggeration, it is utterly chilling. Beck's smiling, insistent performance crosses the line, in measurable beats, from polite to demanding to ghoulish to insane. It's a remarkable scene, and one that puts a face on the intangible villains of the *Poltergeist* saga.



He drank the worm. Insecure Steve Freeling (Craig T. Nelson) vomits up a hideous worm-monster after imbibing a bottle of tequila in *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986).

Although the Freeling family returns intact (save for Dana, away at college), this second story is Mr. Freeling's. He feels impotent for many reasons. He was unable to protect his family at Cuesta Verde,

and now he's unable to provide financially for it (they're forced to live at Diane's mother's house). When the supernatural hijinks starts again, he fears his family doesn't trust them, and watches in horror and envy as the family turns to the Indian medicine man, Taylor, to save them.

Steve finds solace in drink, particularly a bottle of tequila, and in another of the film's best scenes, vomits up all of his rage and inadequacies into one worm-like horror, a manifestation of his insecurities, an embodiment of the very thing he fears, the family-killing Kane. This is a gory and effective sequence and it works well with the film's theme, as stated by Taylor, that Steve is a "man filled with a demon." We saw some of this demons while he was drunk, as he raged against Diane and Carol Anne, and it's daring for the film to include a presentation of alcoholism in the midst of a supernatural thriller. But it works because it reflects Stephen's weakness and insecurity. After all, the film places in opposition two fathers: Kane and his extended family (whom he led to their destruction and doom a hundred years earlier) and Steve, who is desperate to be seen as the leader of his family unit.

Poltergeist II replaces the first film's New Age Mumbo Jumbo with Native American mysticism, and it's probably not a fair trade. Many of the scenes involving the Native American beliefs come off as hokey, and the humor relating to it, particularly involving the car's "manitou," is especially lame. Still, it takes more than that to sink a movie, and *Poltergeist II* must contend with a horrible injection of schmaltz and sentimentality. In a scene that plays as comedic instead of touching, Carol Ann's dead Grandma inhabits the body of a person at a diner. On top of that, there are soft-focus flashbacks of Diane as a child, planting flowers with her mom. And then, when everything is at risk, Grandma returns from the Other Side—with angel wings and all—to rescue the family. This imagery is hokey, even if the message about family is certainly positive.

The film is also undercut by its special effects shots. There's a great joke about Tobe Hooper in the film, as a floating chainsaw goes berserk, but the special effects are weak and matte lines are visible throughout. And when the family goes to confront Kane on the Other Side, it's painfully obvious the unfortunate actors are merely strung up on wires in front of a blue screen. The depiction of the Other Side should be the highlight but the after-life, cloudy and stormy, is a big fat nothing. Also disappointing is the depiction of Kane as the Beast, a stop-motion, insect-like monster with many arms and legs.

The film is torn between what it does best, and what it feels it should

do. It achieves real horror in the organic true moments among characters. The confrontation with Kane, the Tequila Monster and even the flashback in the claustrophobic cavern beneath the Cuesta Verde house all suggest a very organic, human kind of evil. One where fears are twisted and multiply, where death is tangible and horrific. These scenes are masterful, and I suspect they are what most interested director Brian Gibson. Yet whenever *Poltergeist II* feels like it has to live up to the special effects roller coaster ride legacy of its progenitor, it fails. The set pieces, including the visit to the Other Side and a fanciful moment wherein Robbie's braces unspool and go crazy, are pure phantasmagoria and seem present only to appease the demographic who came to the film looking for a light show.

Poltergeist II: The Other Side is almost a good movie, and if it had evidenced the courage to delve deeper into the things that really scare us, including the dark side of family life, it might have been a great one. By including cheesy humor, by relying on hokum, by focusing on schmaltzy truisms, the film shoots itself in the foot time and time again.

Psycho 3



Critical Reception

“[J]ust short of being a little masterpiece ... Nearly everything about *Psycho 3* works, from Perkins' direction to his—and the rest of the cast's—performance to Charles Edward Pogue's screenplay ... [It] even pokes into some Hitchcockian areas where Hitchcock himself might have feared to tread...”—Ken Hanke, *A Critical Guide to Horror Film Series*, Garland Publishing Inc., 1991, page 230.

“Perkins shows the same precision as a director that he demonstrates as an actor. His only mistake may have been his choice of a vehicle. In trying to revive *Psycho*, he was going head-to-head with one of the best filmmakers of all time. It was inevitable that his effort would come up short.”—Jeff Strickler, “*Psycho 3* is too familiar to be frightening,” *Star Tribune*, July 8, 1986, page 01C.

“The humor in *Psycho 3* is really hard to get into. It involves the transformation of the psychotic murderer of the 1960s into a camp comedy figure of the 1980s ... Unfortunately, most of this seems out of director Perkins' reach.”—Martin Moynihan, “*Psycho 3*, or ‘I'm OK,

We're Not So Good,' and the Sequel's of Two Minds," The Times Union, July 4, 1986, page C1.

"Charles Edward Pogue, he of Cronenberg's *The Fly*, hit a solid triple with this film, this time around directed by Anthony Perkins himself. It breaks free of the mystery mold that the preceding sequel had followed, and basically just plays out as a narrative of a character we like (meaning Norman) trying to come to grips with his own special brand of insanity. Perkins doesn't get quite as good a performance out of himself as Norman as the preceding two directors had, but Perkins does a great job with the rest of the film, bringing the Bates Motel kicking and screaming into the 1980s. It's an interesting film in much the same way it's interesting to watch Nimoy making *Star Trek* films—there are little nuances that you may not even see that these guys introduce into their films, just because they've lived and breathed these characters for so long."—William Latham, author *Eternity Unbound, Mary's Monster, Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anthony Perkins (Norman Bates); Diana Scarwid (Maureen); Jeff Fahey (Duane Duke); Roberta Maxwell (Tracy Venable); Hugh Gillin (Sheriff Hunt); Lee Garlington (Myrna); Robert Allan Browne (Statler); Gary Bayer (Father Brian); Patience Cleveland (Sister Margaret); Juliette Cummins (Red); Steve Guevera (Deputy Leo); Donovan Scott (Kyle); Katt Shea Ruben (Patsy); Hugo L. Stanger (Harvey Leach).

CREW: Universal Pictures. *Casting:* Nancy Naylor. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Film Editor:* David Blewitt. *Production Designer:* Henry Bumstead. *Director of Photography:* Bruce Surtees. *Associate Producer:* Donald E. Zepfel. *Written by:* Charles Edward Pogue. *Based on characters created by:* Robert Bloch. *Produced by:* Hilton A. Green. *Special Visual Effects:* Syd Dutton and Bill Taylor, Illusion Arts, Inc. *Special Makeup Designed and Developed by:* Michael Westmore. *Directed by:* Anthony Perkins. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

P.O.V.

"Tony asked me to co-direct, and I wanted him in *Link*, but they clashed. I visited his set and saw the tower from the opening, which was Henry Bumstead's exact replica of the one in *Vertigo*. They made Tony beef up the ending with gore. He got mad at me for saying this, but I preferred his earlier cut."—*Psycho II* director Richard Franklin describes his association with *Psycho 3*.

INCANTATION: “The past is never really past. It stays with me all the time. And no matter how hard I try I can’t really escape. It’s always there, throbbing inside of you.”—During a reflective moment, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) discusses his life with reporter Tracey Venable (Roberta Maxwell) in *Psycho 3*, a film directed by Perkins.

SYNOPSIS: A nun named Maureen (Scarwid), who has lost her faith, and a guitar-playing sleazeball named Duane Duke (Fahey) end up at the Bates Motel after a rainy night on the highway. Duke takes a job as assistant manager to rehabilitated mass murderer Norman Bates (Perkins) and Maureen catches Norman’s eye, reminding him of a victim, Marion Crane from many years earlier. Nosy reporter Tracy Venable (Maxwell) is also in town, writing a piece on “the insanity defense,” and hoping to interview Norman. Before long, Norman is back to his murderous ways, dressing up like his mother and killing any woman who arouses him, including two motel guests.

Meanwhile, Tracy digs into the disappearance of Ms. Spool, a woman who claimed that she was Norman’s real mother. Meanwhile, Norman and Maureen fall in love.

COMMENTARY: Norman Bates falls in love in Anthony Perkins’ directorial debut, *Psycho 3*. Less technically accomplished than *Psycho II* and ultimately a hair less involving because there’s no real mystery to solve (unlike its two predecessors), *Psycho 3* nonetheless impresses with allusions to Hitchcock’s original and finely wrought gallows humor.

Psycho 3’s narrative is also designed less tightly than its immediate predecessor, and so serves not as the thrill machine that Franklin crafted so well. The result of this strategy is that *Psycho 3* isn’t suspenseful or even particularly immediate. However, a looser narrative structure allows Perkins more time to play with Norman, and to include some interesting character moments.

After opening with a burst of drama (and the inflammatory line “There is no God!”) at a convent, the action in *Psycho 3* shifts to the Bates estate. Tumbleweeds roll by. The wind blows. In a touch of terrific continuity, the camera even catches a fleeting glimpse of Mary’s “light” reading from *Psycho II*, a copy of *In the Belly of the Beast*. Here, it is discarded in the dirt.

Alone, Norman’s back to practicing his taxidermy, poisoning birds and stuffing them. Norman seems happy, munching peanut butter crackers while stitching up the dead animals, even if this life may not seem like

our idea of paradise.

Into this solitude arrives two players who change everything, Jeff Fahey's Duane and Diana Scarwid's Maureen, the fallen nun. Like Norman himself, Maureen has a dark past to escape from (the death of a Mother Superior she caused during a suicide attempt), and perhaps that's why Norman falls for her.

In a twisted but provocative moment (and another reflection of *Psycho*'s famous shower scene), Norman is aroused by Maureen, dresses up as Mother to kill her, and finds that she's beaten him to the punch, having slit her wrists in the bathtub. Ironically, Maureen sees Norman not as Mother, but as *The Mother*, the Virgin Mary. She mistakes his glittering butcher knife for a proffered Crucifix and takes Norman's presence there as a "sign" she should live.

After Norman rescues Maureen, they grow even closer, though one suspects relationships like this can never work out for Norman. Still, he believes Maureen represents his second chance with Marion Crane, a woman who bears the same initials, M.C., as Maureen. But fate plays a cruel joke. Norman doesn't hurt his would-be lover, nor does Mother. Instead, Maureen is killed by Cupid's Arrow. She falls down the stairs in Norman's house (much like the detective Arbogast in *Psycho*) and her head strikes a Cupid statue atop a banister, puncturing her brain. That's just Norman's luck, isn't it?

In contrast to the love story, which is sweet in a bizarre way, Duane's presence makes *Psycho 3* feel a little sleazier than its predecessors. His catchphrase is "watch the guitar," which Norman overturns when he attempts to murder Duane and smashes the instrument. Bates does so because Duane has threatened Mother and is blackmailing him. This subplot is kooky, but Perkins is terrific. Duane has stolen Mother's corpse (or, as he calls her, "Mummy") and Norman bargains for her release. "She's just an old lady, a sick old lady," he pleads. This moment again reveals Norman's essential tenderness. He wants his Mother back, even if she's dead.

Why, he wouldn't even hurt a fly...

Unfortunately, *Psycho 3* also feels the need to be "modern" and play to a young eighties crowd and so wanders off into murderous interludes that introduce some motel patrons: drunk homecoming revelers. Norman dresses up as Mother and kills a woman on the toilet (who dies with the utterance "You about scared the piss of me" still on her lips). One murder re-stages the shower sequence, but in a "stall" of

another type, a phone booth. These scenes just aren't that good, although they're bloody. The problem is two-fold. First, these characters have been introduced merely to be killed. And second, the audience already knows what Norman does so the murders don't really serve the narrative or reveal anything new.

The best scene is, surprisingly, a suspense sequence handled with flair by Perkins. Again, it isn't valuable narratively and doesn't contribute to the central love story, but it evidences the gallows humor that Hitchcock is famous for. Norman finds himself questioned by the local sheriff right next to the motel's ice machine. Norman has hidden a corpse in the freezer, but the sheriff doesn't see it. Instead, as he interrogates Norman, he digs around in the ice, scooping up cubes. The camera cuts away to a close-up of the ice, and blood—bloody ice—is everywhere around his grasping digits. He continues to dig. The punchline is that the sheriff even ends up with bloody ice water on his lips (in close-up) and doesn't realize it. This disgusting (and fun) bit of business is intercut with worried reactions shots of Norman, who is on pins and needles wondering if he will be discovered.

Psycho 3 ends with Norman being told by the sheriff that he'll "never get out again," as he's escorted back to the insane asylum where he spent twenty years. "I'll be free, I'll finally be free," Norman replies, and though his response is optimistic, it's undercut by the final sting in the tale/tail, a view of kindly Bates stroking his mother's severed hand.

Even his contradictory ending (is Norman free or still under the thrall of Mother?) is staged competently, but unlike *Psycho II*, it—and all of *Psycho 3*—feels entirely unnecessary. *Psycho II* already evoked sympathy for the Devil, and *Psycho 3* is a film with some really good moments, but no more. Disappointingly, it lands the saga, effectively, back at Square One. Norman is insane, and incarcerated, and Mother's still giving him a hand.

LEGACY: *Psycho 3* was followed by a 1990 TV sequel called *Psycho IV: The Beginning*. Although Perkins returned for the role, most of the action centered on a young Norman's interaction with his still-living mother, played by Olivia Hussey. Young Norman was portrayed by Henry Thomas, of *E.T.* fame. In 1998, the original *Psycho* was remade shot-for-shot by Gus Van Sant, with Vince Vaughn taking on the role of Norman.

Silent Night, Deadly Night Part 2

½ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Eric Freeman (Ricky Caldwell); James L. Newman (Dr. Henry Bloom); Elizabeth Cayton (Jennifer); Jean Miller (Mother Superior); Brian Michael Henley (Ricky at 10); Darrel Guilbeau (Ricky at 15); Corinne Gelfan, Michael Combatti (The Rosenbergs); Kenneth Bryan James (Chip); Ron Moriarity (Detective); Frank Novak (Loan Shark); Randy Baughman (Eddie); Joanna White (Paula); Lenny Rose (Loser); Nadya Wynd (Sister Mary); Kenneth McCabe (Rent-A-Cop); J. Aubrey Island (Orderly); Randy Post (Loudmouth in Movie Theater); Kent Kopasse (Cop #1). Stephanie Babbitt (Little Girl on Bike); Michael Marloe (Cop #2); Traci Odom, Jennie Webb (Nuns on Street); Larry Kellman (Cop #3).

CREW: Silent Night Releasing Corp. Presents a Lawrence Appelbaum Production. *Director of Photography:* Harvey Genkins. *Music:* Michael Armstrong. *Story:* Lee Harry, Joseph H. Earle, Dennis Patterson, Lawrence Appelbaum. *Based on characters created by:* Michael Hickey, Paul Cami. *Screenplay by:* Lee Harry, Joseph H. Earle. *Associate Producers:* Eric A. Gage, Joseph H. Earle. *Produced by:* Lawrence Appelbaum. *Edited and Directed by:* Lee Harry. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On December 24—Christmas Eve—a psychiatrist, Dr. Bloom (Newman), interrogates the violent and psychotic Ricky Caldwell (Freeman), the brother of the Santa Claus killer, Billy Caldwell. Dr. Bloom learns that Ricky is also a twisted murderer who in his earlier years was tormented by the sight of Santa Claus and the appearance of nuns, due to his hatred of the Mother Superior in the orphanage where he lived.

Over the years, Ricky grew accustomed to killing his enemies if they were “naughty.” He was incarcerated for the murder of his girlfriend, Jennifer (Cayton), and his ensuing spree of mayhem. Realizing the date, Ricky kills Dr. Newman, escapes from captivity, and heads for the home of Mother Superior (Miller), an old woman in a wheelchair and disfigured by a stroke. He chases her through her house with an axe, dressed as Santa (like his brother). The police intervene with lethal force, but not in time to save Mother Superior, who is decapitated.

COMMENTARY: It appears that 1983’s *Boogeyman II*, in addition to

being a really terribly made film, also inspired a nasty 1980s horror mini-trend: the clips movie. In this (fortunately) little-known genre, cheapskate movie producers save money by actually creating only half a sequel to a popular film, filling the rest of the time with “flashbacks” of the previous hit. *Silent Night, Deadly Night* 2 is a perfect example. It includes seven flashbacks from the 1984 original Santa Clause killer flick, which was a well-made horror picture, and one that stood out from the mad slasher pack.

The lengthy flashbacks are purportedly coming straight from the mind of an incarcerated character named Ricky Caldwell, brother to the spree killer in the previous movie. Yet his flashbacks include memories that he could not possibly be privy to, since he was not present when these events occurred. For instance, Ricky was present neither for his brother’s employment at a toy store (where his massacre began) nor for his brutal slaying of Linnea Quigley’s character ... though he has flashbacks of both. So then how is it that he remembers these incidents? Perhaps more to the point, Ricky was an infant for the first featured flashback (the murder of his mother by a crook dressed as Santa), and a child for many of the others. Is it really possible that Ricky remembers these events or did somebody else helpfully fill him in on the missing details?

Leaving behind the fact that a good fifty percent of the running time consists of reruns, I have plenty of other complaints, and prime among them is Eric Freeman’s over-the-top performance as Ricky. The actor laughs and cackles maniacally to not-so-subtly suggest that Ricky is evil. However, worse than this obvious touch is the sing-song, sarcastic cadence Freeman adopts for the majority of his dialogue, with the accent often falling in wildly bizarre and inappropriate places. “I was *eighteen*. Dumping *trash*. That kinda *shit*”; “I couldn’t *afford* to go to college”; “You’ll *like* this.” It’s as though the performer picked a random word per sentence and then weighted it heavily.

The film brings back Mother Superior, but she is played here by a different actress, not Lilyun Chauvin, which is problematic ... since we actually see Chauvin in the flashbacks. Apparently, moviegoers are not supposed to notice. The movie offers a lame attempt at explaining the mismatched footage by informing us that Mother Superior had a stroke, one that scarred her face and left her in a wheelchair. The makeup job, however, is inadequate to the task of making anyone believe this could possibly be the same woman.

Many sequels in 1980s horror are bad, but few have witnessed such a degradation of concept from first film to second film. *Silent Night*,

Deadly Night was actually a respectable picture about a traumatized child, and the way that society failed him—again and again—until he struck back. There's no underlying theme or meaning in *Silent Night, Deadly Night 2*; it's a lazy and cynical picture designed to cash in on the brand name of the popular first film, and it leaves nobody for audiences to root for. Whose side should be taken in the finale, which sees a mad killer dressed as Santa lay siege to the home of a nun in a wheelchair? The cruel Mother Superior whose draconian practices created Billy and Ricky? Or Ricky himself, a sneering, monstrous human being who kills for no other reason than he judges certain people "naughty," including his girlfriend Jennifer, whom he strangles with a car's antenna.

It would be harder to dislike *Silent Night, Deadly Night 2* if it made some attempt at a linear plot, if it made some kind of psychologically trenchant remark about serial killers in our society, or even if it was suspenseful or just a tad scary. But as it stands, the movie is an utter waste of time. The murders are ridiculously staged and poorly handled, the worst being Ricky's attack on a gangster: He impales him on an umbrella, then opens it ... bloodily. So the movie doesn't even really have the horror credentials that would make it a gorefest. And yet, despite all these failings, someone went ahead and produced *Silent Night, Deadly Night 3*. And yes, that film also includes flashbacks—more bloody clips!—from *Silent Night, Deadly Night*.

Slaughter High

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Caroline Munro (Carol); Simon Scuddamore (Marty Rantzen); Kelly Baker (Nancy); Sally Cross (Susan); Billy Hartman (Frank); Carmine Iannaccone (Skip); Gary Martin (Joe); Josephine Scandi (Shirley); John Segal (Carl); Donna Yaeger (Stella); Marc Smith (Coach); Dick Randall (Manny); John Clark (Digby).

CREW: A Steve Minasian and Dick Randall production of a George Dugdale, Mark Ezra, Peter Litten Film. *Director of Photography:* Alan Pudney. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Film Editor:* Jim Connock. *Produced by:* Steve Minasian, Dick Randall. *Special Effects Design:* Peter Littel. *Written and Directed by:* George Dugdale, Mark Ezra, Peter Litten. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Doddsville County High School on April Fools Day, a group of students including the sexy Carol (Munro) play a trick on the virginal dork named Marty (Scuddamore), and it ends up going horribly wrong when he is burned and scarred in a chemistry lab fire. Years later, Carol—now a movie star—prepares to return for a class reunion on April Fool’s Day. But Carol and her circle of old buddies find the school abandoned, and only the practical jokers who hurt Marty have been invited. When her friends begin to die, Carol and the others realize that Marty is back and doling out some revenge for the bad old days of high school.

COMMENTARY: Great! It’s another virtually incomprehensible, badly shot slasher film! This one stars the familiar Caroline Munro (*Maniac* [1980], *Don’t Open Till Christmas* [1984]) as an actress returning to her alma mater for a class reunion. Turns out that in high school, she was part of an “elite hit squad” that played practical jokes on dorks. Now, the worm *and* the tables have turned, and it’s the members of that practical joker team that will be tortured in a night of pure terror. All to the tune of really cheesy 1980s music.

Slaughter High begins on April Fool’s Day, making it, technically, a holiday-themed slasher. Here, the crime in the past is one of the meanest and most elaborate ever captured on celluloid. Marty (Scuddamore) is a virgin-dork who is lured into a rest room by a gorgeous female classmate. Then, once he’s naked in the shower, the practical jokers film him with a video camera and proceed to dunk his head into the toilet. One of the preps conducting this “joke” is dressed as a court jester, but the fun doesn’t stop yet. Later, Marty is in the chemistry lab and the practical jokers cause a fire and nitric acid splashes Marty’s face. He’s burned and scarred. Then he goes crazy and is remanded to a mental institute.

It’s hard to come back from days like that...

Several years later, Carol (Munro) and her mean-spirited buddies return for the reunion but find the school empty save for each other. Then they are hunted and killed by a killer wearing the uniform of the court jester. During one practical joke, it looks like the killer is wearing a hockey mask, and since Harry Manfredini wrote the score, the film lurches into an authentic *Friday the 13th* riff. The film’s red herring is Digby, the old janitor now a caretaker. He’s no longer a janitor because the school is no longer open, but the film needed a red herring, so what the heck.

Since Marty was a geek before he was humiliated and transformed

into a killer, his weapon is science. He uses electricity (in the *coup de grâce*) to kill Stella and Frank while they are engaging in sex. The bed is wired to electrocute them as Stella achieves orgasm. On other occasions, Marty uses his familiarity with chemicals to destroy his oppressors. There's a bath in a pool of acid that leads to a very messy death; when Ted thinks he's drinking a beer, he's drinking a chemical which causes his guts to explode out of his belly. Lest we forget, Marty was a chemistry student.

When *Slaughter High* runs through its victim base, this lethargic slasher film, which is only marginally more coherent than Munro's *Don't Open Till Christmas*, throws in the ending from *Maniac* for good measure. Yes, the tables turn yet again, and Marty's victims return from the grave to enact revenge on their killer. But it's all a nightmare (or is it?!). Marty's in the hospital, and his bandages will come off in a few weeks. Does this mean, he's still in high school, contemplating his revenge? Does this mean that the massacre occurred and he survived? Your guess is as good as mine.

No other slasher film has utilized so many ingredients of the paradigm (and so poorly to boot!). Besides the ones discussed in this review (the uniform, the transgression, the practical joke, the red herring, the *coup de grâce*), there's the shower scene, the false alarm, the stay-aware shot, the vice (in this case, weed), the kid with the video camera, the breast part of the movie, and the killer in the back seat of the car. There's also the scene where the car won't start, a final girl (Carol), the final tour of the dead and *the sting-in-the-tale/tail*. All that's really missing is the cat jolt. And scares. And characterization. And quality.

The Supernaturals

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Maxwell Caulfield (Pvt. Ray Ellis); Talia Balsam (Pvt. Angela La June); Bradford Bancroft (Pvt. Weir); Levar Burton (Pvt. Osgood); Bobby Di Cicco (Pvt. Cort); Scott Jacoby (Pvt. Mendez); Richard Pachorek (Pvt. Sedgewick); Margaret Shendal (Melanie); John Zarchen (Engel); Nichelle Nichols (Sgt. Hawkins); James Kirkwood (Captain); Chad Sheets (Jeremy); Jesse Lawrence Ferguson (Recruit).

CREW: Republic Entertainment International Presents a Sandy Howard Production. *Music:* Robert O'Ragland. *Film Editor:* John R.

Bowey. Casting: Paul Bengston, David Cohn. *Director of Photography:* Lyons Collister. *Associate Producers:* Victoria Plummer, William Fay. *Ghost Effects:* Mark Shostrom. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dan Bradley. *Written by:* Joel Soisson, Michael S. Murphey. *Executive Producers:* Mel Pearl, Don Levine. *Producers:* Michael S. Murphey, Joel Soisson. *Directed by:* Armand Mastroianni. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On April 12, 1865, in rural Alabama, a ruthless Union Army general forces his Confederate prisoners—including a gifted child named Jeremy—to walk a deadly minefield. Over one hundred years later, in the 1980s, a group of raw Army recruits from the same unit (the 44th), straight out of Fort Benning, are on maneuvers in that region, under the command of the hard-nosed Sergeant Hawkins (Nichols). The recruits encounter deadly booby traps, a subterranean tunnel system, strange supernatural forces, and a beautiful, mysterious woman named Melanie (Shendal).

Ray Ellis finds a diary in an old shack and learns that Melanie is Jeremy's mother, and that she has been given eternal life with which to wreak vengeance on the Yanks. Before long, zombie Confederates are crawling through the mists of the night, murdering the recruits. Ellis must convince Jeremy it is time to put an end to old hatreds.

COMMENTARY: *Southern Comfort* meets *Ghost Story* in the direct-to-video *The Supernaturals*. While on maneuvers, a group of misfit U.S. soldiers encounter deadly booby traps, ghosts and eventually zombies from the Civil War era, and the film vets these discoveries in occasionally atmospheric fashion. Leading the good guys is none other than Nichelle Nichols in a surprisingly strong, anti-Lt. Uhura performance as the tough-as-nails drill sergeant.

The zombies attack under cover of an unearthly blue fog, and there are some evocative, EC comics-style views of ragged zombie soldiers marching through the mist with bayonets at the ready. Had the film tread more on this terrain, the clash of living and undead armies, it probably would have been better overall, or at least more exciting. As it stands, *The Supernaturals* squanders much of its running time on interpersonal conflicts and piecemeal discoveries (like Confederate tunnels) that suggest danger without actually *causing* danger. “Some psycho around here likes to whittle,” warns LeVar Burton (another *Star Trek* actor!) after uncovering and discarding a spear trap, for instance.

The idea of the ghostly siren figure—in flowing white dress no less—gets play too, giving the film a Gothic sheen. The Gothic aesthetic,

which originally involved the castles and ruins of West Europe, is perfectly translatable to the post-Civil War American South, a world where farms and plantations are essentially equivalent to those crumbling castles. The mysterious heroine who promises both love and danger (like the character in *Rappaccinni's Daughter*) is a stalwart of Gothic literature, and that's the role of the siren in this film. These noteworthy ideas could be more artistically vetted than they are, but for a direct-to-video picture, *The Supernaturals* is a respectable piece of work. It just never quite reaches the pitch of terror that would make it truly memorable.

Terror at Tenkiller

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mike Wiles (Tor); Stacey Logan (Leslie); Michele Merchant (Janna); Dale Buckmaster (Preacher); Kevin Meyer (Josh); Debbie Killion (Waitress); Jill Holmes (Denise).

CREW: United Entertainment Pictures Presents a Ken Meyer Film. *Executive Producer:* Bill F. Blair. *Original Story and Screenplay by:* Claudia Meyer. *Director of Photography:* Steve Wacks. *Film Editors:* Kevin Meyer, Keith Melton. *Music:* Bob Farrar. *Additional Music:* Marianne Pendino. *Casting:* Steve Hetherington. *Special Makeup Effects:* DEFX Inc., David Powell, Doug Edwards. *Produced and Directed by:* Ken Meyer. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A co-ed named Leslie (Logan) has concerns about telling her possessive boyfriend Josh (Meyer) that she doesn't want to marry him, so she heads up to the nearby lake resort at Tenkiller to think about it with her assertive best friend, Janna (Merchant).

A waitress named Denise (Holmes) disappeared at the lake recently, and another summer waitress at the local Cove Diner is brutally murdered nearby. Once at their cabin, the girls meet the custodians of their boathouse, an old coot named Preacher (Buckmaster), and a handsome young man named Tor (Wiles).

By night, Preacher spies on the girls, but soon meets his end when a killer slices and dices him. Leslie and Janna begin to receive creepy and threatening messages on their cabin answering machine, but Leslie is convinced Josh is behind the calls and that they don't represent any real danger. This is an incorrect assumption, however,

and the local madman gets closer and closer, first striking out at Janna, and then waiting for Leslie.

COMMENTARY: The biggest problem with some low-budget slasher movies made in the 1980s is not that they're especially bad ... only that they're epically boring. Nothing unexpected happens because of the familiarity of and over-reliance on the slasher paradigm, and the tone is so low-key and naturalistic, that some movies stretch on forever, like you're watching grass grow.

Alas, the regionally made *Terror at Tenkiller* is one of those ennui-provokers. Its boredom quotient is amplified significantly by the fact that the movie is cheap, which means that scenes set at night are underlit, and you can't make out what's happening on screen.

The cheapness of the enterprise also means that the dialogue is poorly mixed and the background audio is too loud. The characters' words become a soft drone in the dark and ... before you know it, your eyes are glazing and you are falling...

Zzzzzzzz...

Dull. Dull. Dull. *Terror at Tenkiller* boasts no real terror to speak of, unless you experience a nightmare while sleeping through it, but rather plays like an endless (but poorly recorded) afternoon soap opera as the lead character Leslie discusses her boyfriend woes with a friend, Janna.

Now, on one hand, it's commendable for a slasher film to bring up the idea of domestic violence and abusive relationships. Leslie acts like she has Battered Women's Syndrome and Josh is really annoying. Kudos. It's another thing, however, to do absolutely nothing interesting with the concept, except use the abusive boyfriend as one of a few red herrings in the film.

You got your organizing principle (a lake and the recreational activities around it), you got your red herrings (the abusive boyfriend), you got your breast part of the movie and shower scene, you got your final girl (Leslie), and of course, you have your mysterious psychotic killer. But *Terror at Tenkiller* doesn't play with the well-established formula.

The "sting in the tail/tale" is poorly executed (the killer, Tor, looks to be laughing—or at the very least amused—as he leaps out of the lake, arms ridiculously outstretched). Worse, it's poorly conceived.

Here's why: The film almost had me for a while because it dramatizes the story of Leslie, a woman disenfranchised by her relationship with abusive male figures. To reinforce this theme, the legend of Tenkiller's sister is recounted. She was an Indian squaw who was taken captive by an enemy tribe, but took revenge on the evil men by killing ten braves. She drowned the last of the braves, and died with him in the lake. But now, the Indian girl's spirit supposedly inhabits the body of water and protects young girls from evil men.

Okay, this is cool. As the ending of the film took Leslie out onto the lake, in increasing danger, I understood that the legacy of Tenkiller's sister was going to pass on to Leslie. As our final girl, she was going to confront and kill the killer, perhaps even drawing on the strength of the mythological figure. The myth would be re-born in a sense, as a wronged woman found the power to stand up and fight back against her oppressors.

Wrong!

The movie ends with Leslie dispatching Tor, the psychotic killer, only to have him jump back up out of the water in the closing freeze frame to menace her one more time.

So what gives with the legend of Tenkiller? Was the myth *not* supposed to be a metaphor for Leslie's situation with her boyfriend and the killer at the lake? If not, then why even bring it up in the first place? Basically, the movie makes mincemeat of its own logic in the last shot. I guess Tenkiller couldn't be bothered to show up and help a sista in need.

I'm going back to sleep.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"The last half of the film ... abounds in non-stop scenes of visual excess ... The static and eerie visual displays of *TCM 1* have been replaced in the sequel by a completely over-the-top (and appropriate) amusement part style of dynamic filmmaking."—Cynthia Freeland, *Thinking Through Cinema: The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*, Westview Press, 2000, page 249, 250.

“Tobe Hooper finally finds himself back where he started. Leaning more heavily in the black humor direction than one might have expected, Hooper offers us a fresh visit with the Sawyer clan, those barbecue brothers of the Lone Star State. And in particular, we get a hilarious Jim Siedow performance with most of the film’s best lines. Dennis Hopper is all over the place with his intensity, and Caroline Williams holds the madness together. Bill Moseley, however, manages to out-creep his ‘hitchhiker’ brother from the first film, showing us a hyper Vietnam veteran complete with steel plate in the head and probably the nastiest scene involving a coat hanger and a cigarette lighter that you’re liable to see. Tom Savini provides some of his finest gore effects, and if nothing more, Hooper delivers a fun, entertaining film, perhaps not as special a film as the original, but worth its weight in gold as entertainment. Lou Perry as L.G. also has some fine moments, always looking out for his darlin’ Ms. Williams. Welcome back, Tobe!”—William Latham, author *Eternity Unbound, Mary’s Monster, Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dennis Hopper (Lieutenant “Lefty” Enright); Caroline Williams (Stretch); Jim Siedow (Cook); Bill Moseley (Chop-Top); Bill Johnson (Leatherface); Ken Evert (Grandpa); Harlan Jordan (Patrolman); Kirk Cisco (Detective); James N. Harrelli (Cut-Rite Manager); Lou Perry (L.G. McPeters); Barry Kinyon (Mercedes Driver); Chris Douridas (Gunner); Judy Kelly (Gourmet Yuppette); John Martin Ivey (Yuppie); Kinky Friedman (Sports Anchorman); Wirt Cain (Anchorman); Dan Jenkins (TV Commentator); Joe Bob Briggs (Gonzo Movie Goer).

CREW: The Cannon Group., Inc., presents a Golan-Globus Production of a Tobe Hooper film. *Special Makeup Effects:* Tom Savini. *Costume Designer:* Carin Hooper. *Music:* Tobe Hooper, Jerry Lambert. *Production Designer:* Cary White. *Stunt Coordinator:* John Moio. *Director of Photography:* Richard Kooris. *Film Editor:* Alan Jakubowicz. *Associate Producer:* L.M. Kit Carson. *Co-Producer:* Tobe Hooper. *Executive Producers:* Henry Holmes, James Jorgenson. *Written by:* L.M. Kit Carson. *Produced by:* Menahem Golan, Yoram Globus. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* No rating. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The deranged cannibal family of Travis, Texas is back on the attack. Leatherface (Johnson), Cook (Siedow) and Chop-Top (Moseley) are now living under an amusement park called Texas Battle Land and cooking up award-winning chili with a secret ingredient: human beings. These maniacal killers still haunt the rural back roads and one man is determined to find them and bring them to

justice: Lefty Enright (Hopper), whose own family is among the cannibal clan's earlier victims. When a yuppie records his own death by chainsaw on an open call to a telephone line, the sexy D.J. "Stretch" (Williams) passes on the tape to Lefty and runs afoul of the lunatics herself. Leatherface develops a crush on Stretch and she is taken to the family headquarters for a nice family supper with Grandpa.

COMMENTARY: Reagan's decade was a good one for the Leatherface clan, the so-called "Sawyer" family, and for their chronicler, Tobe Hooper. Since the premiere of the first *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in 1974, Hooper and his deranged family had both made successful bids for respectability, moving up the ladder in their diverse professions (movies and meat, respectively). *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2*, 1986's unrated family reunion, revels in a decade's worth of political and social changes, revealing a Hooper and a Sawyer family funnier and more confident in their macabre enterprises.

In the original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Hooper unexpectedly presented audiences with a terrifying, bizarre, surreal world from which it could not escape. The sequel, though equally intense and startling in its own fashion, is not so straight-faced in its diabolical machinations. Instead, Hooper and screenwriter Carson employ the distancing techniques of comedy and subversive wit to create an odyssey that can only be described as a thinking man's horror movie. The absence of decorum that made the original *Chain Saw* such a revelation is absent here, replaced by wit and satire.

However,—and to the film's ultimate detriment as a successful entertainment—Hooper's camera also focuses intently on extremely graphic and convincing blood and gore. These twin approaches (comedy and nausea) never gel adequately, and that may be the reason why the film is, in many circles, considered less powerful and artful than its notorious progenitor.



Bring it on: Lefty (Dennis Hopper) goes nuts in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986).

The humorous, pointed satirical elements of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* work well, resulting in an often amusing, sometimes uproarious flick. The bulk of the comedy material depicts the not-so-subtle “yuppification” of the cannibal family. The family has survived Nixon, Ford and Jimmy Carter’s malaise days of the 1970s (no gas, no

trust in government, no jobs) and found new success in Reagan's economic boom of the mid-1980s.

In particular, the local yokels, led by the business-minded entrepreneur, Cook, have become successful free enterprisers, the self-employed owners of "The Last Round-Up," an appropriately named mobile barbecue and chili catering company. This small business has nabbed a prestigious chili cook-off contest two years running, but Cook still isn't satisfied, mainly because of his Schedule C expenses, and the general ineptitude of his less business-minded partners in crime, Chop-Top and Leatherface. "Man builds a good, solid trade by hookin' and crookin'," he complains, "and the gods just kick him right in the balls!"

Other relevant *bon mots* include Cook's "Damn property taxes fuck up everything" and "The small businessman gets it in the ass every time." Yes indeed, even cannibals can come along for the Reagan revolution.

In admittedly colorful language, it is clear that Drayton (Cook) has gone mainstream and become a fully functional cog in a growing economy. All of these funny moments are played at a perfect pitch and the viewer comes away with the notion that "making a killing" doesn't necessarily have two separate and distinct meanings for this particular family. The Sawyers kill other people to make a financial killing, so the "killing" here is connected.

Some humor involves the new character of Chop-Top and his "retro" yet highly fashionable fascination with the late 1960s and the Vietnam War. In fact, Chop-Top's main obsession in the film isn't meat or his family's murderous trade, it's his own shot at economic stability and financial freedom. He's developed a prospectus, a "business plan," for Nam Land, an amusement park based on his wartime experience "over there." "It's what the people want," he insists, and one senses that Hooper and Carson have very carefully gauged the times. The mid-1980s were, after all, the prime time of nostalgia for all things 1960s, from the Beatles to the rehabilitation of Richard Nixon to the Vietnam War. In November of 1982, the country saw the dedication of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C. after a march by thousands of ex-soldiers. Also, there were four major Vietnam movies produced and released during the decade (*Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill* and *The Hanoi Hilton*).

And though *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* arrived at the beginning of that wave, its creators seemed to sense that the public was turning the war—like everything else from the 1960s—into toothless, nostalgic

fodder. Chop-Top, primed to cash in on that wave, sees Nam Land as his opportunity to get rich quick. How far-fetched is this idea? Today, Playstation 2 sells games in which players can participate in campaigns from World War II, and also in the modern Middle East.

Since the 1980s was the decade of Gordon Gekko, “greed is good,” the corporatization and businessification of middle America and everything from schools to the film business, it’s appropriate that this movement is skewered here by socially minded Hooper. It appears that the Gipper’s revolution even struck Texas and the most notorious of nut cases. Murderers all, the Sawyers still fit in with their society: valuing wealth above rule of law. And again like the upwardly mobile, they don’t care who they have to grease to get ahead.

And in its depiction of Leatherface’s amorous advances towards the beautiful D.J., Stretch, the film also reflects another popular 1980s political myth: the return to so-called traditional family values. In Chainsaw World, Grandma and Grandpa are beloved and revered (despite the fact they’re mostly dead) and the family that slays together stays together. Leatherface flirts with the idea of romance, but soon realizes (from Cook and from Stretch) that sex is a “swindle” and that only “the saw” is truly family.



Stretch is exposed and vulnerable to Leatherface's chainsaw.

Despite such timely barbs, ripped from the Zeitgeist, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* perhaps goes too far and is too heavy with the thick red stuff. There was very little blood and gore in the original film, a factor that makes it timeless. The film felt so powerful, so raw, it didn't *need* to show a lot of the bloody details. At its heightened, frenetic pace, audiences were bludgeoned into filling in the "blanks" on screen with gore and horrors of their own imagining. Alas, the sequel is not so cleverly or artfully crafted in this regard, going all-out for the on-screen gross-out factor. In a sense this reflects the eighties aesthetic too: more is better. In all cases.

Of course, gore remains an important part of the horror film equation, but the choice to include such realistic gore diminishes this film's lovingly crafted comedy sequences. The butchering scene wherein Leatherface cuts off L.G.'s face, in particular, is completely convincing and harrowing from the standpoint of realism and special effects. This is a bad miscalculation, however, because the excessive gruel smothers the humor of what might have truly been an amusing moment (L.G., still alive, spit out his tobacco).

One of the most interesting elements of the original *Chain Saw* was its lack of sexual politics. Sally Hardesty and her hippie friends represented only meat to the deranged Sawyers. *Chainsaw 2* moves into new and much more contentious territory by turning the chainsaw into an obvious phallic symbol, representing Leatherface's ascent into a "puberty" or adolescence of sorts.

When Leatherface ambushes Stretch at the radio station, he plunges his saw between her legs, right into a freezer filled with ice. Unable to remove the weapon from the packed ice, Leatherface pumps and grinds suggestively. Later, when he nearly strokes Stretch's attractive, naked legs with the saw, the killer prematurely ejaculates into his pants, thrusting and retracting his hips with a sexual savagery. Again, perhaps this shift represents an eighties ethos, wherein films like *Perfect* (1985) and exercise regimens like Jane Fonda's somehow sexualized the culture to a degree previously unseen.

And speaking of sexual politics, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* acknowledges a decade's worth of advances in women's rights by featuring a stunning conclusion that reverses the original's denouement. After dispatching the Sawyers, Stretch—now in possession of the saw (a phallic symbol, recall)—performs her own, distaff variation of Leatherface's victorious chainsaw dance, his insane twirl that ended the first film. Thus *Chainsaw 2* appears to recognize that for a woman to survive (like Sally Hardesty) is no longer enough

in the 1980s. Instead, she must triumph through domination, taking the man's power (represented by the saw) and harnessing it for herself.

The most important shift in *Chainsaw 2*, however, involves the overall tone. The first film was out-and-out horror, devoid of postmodern humor and even a conventional narrative. There was no sense of decorum and so expectations were dashed. This had the effect of making the audience feel vulnerable. The sequel is quite the opposite, relying on funny barbs at contemporary society and a traditional narrative structure that finds a fallen lawman (Dennis Hopper's Enright) pursuing his long bid for "justice" against those who killed members of his family. This retreat to conventional storytelling is disappointing, but balanced by the surreal nature of the film, the willingness to incorporate the reality of the 1980s into the lives of the *dramatis personae*.

It's funny to contemplate that a film called *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* is actually an intellectual exercise in satire, but that's precisely the case. Underneath the gore-filled surface, the film obsesses on American economics and family value sensibilities. A family "downsized" by the job layoffs of the 1970s sticks together through the tough times and rises as a self-made success in the 1980s, profiting from the Reagan revolution despite—or perhaps because of—their predilection for cannibalism. This is the perfect representation of the "don't worry be happy/be afraid," be very afraid duality. On one level, the Sawyers are self-made men, champions of a free market. But right beneath that admirable accomplishment comes awareness that they've gotten to the top of their particular heap by sawing, carving, and even devouring those who get in their way. A lot like corporate raiders and so called "masters of the universe," no?

Trick or Treat

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Marc Price (Eddie "Rag Man"); Tony Fields (Sammi Curr); Lisa Orgolini (Leslie Graham); Doug Savant (Tim); Elaine Joyce (Angie Weinbauer); Gene Simmons (Nuke); Ozzy Osbourne (Reverend Gilstrom); Elise Richards (Genie Wooster); Richard Pachorek (Ron Avery); Glenn Morgan (Roger Mockus); Clare Nomo (Maggie); Alice Nunn (Mrs. Cavell); Larry Sprinkle (Marv McCain); Claudia Templeton

(Hysterical Survivor); Kevin Yagher (Lead Guitarist); Terry Loughlin (Senator); Charles Martin Smith (School Principal)

CREW: *Presented by:* De Laurentiis Entertainment Group. *Casting:* Paul Bengston, David Cohn. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dan Bradley. *Original Music composed and performed by:* Fastway. *Music Score:* Christopher Young. *Production Design:* Curt Schnell. *Special Makeup Effects created by:* Kevin Yagher. *Film Editor:* Jane Schwartz Jaffe. *Director of Photography:* Robert Elswit. *Associate Producer:* Scott White. *Story:* Rhet Topham. *Screenplay:* Michael S. Murphey, Joel Soisson, Rhet Topham. *Produced by:* Michael S. Murphey, Joel Soisson. *Directed by:* Charles Martin Smith. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A picked-on high school student, “Rag Man” (Price), is shattered when his heavy metal rock icon Sammi Curr (Fields) dies in a hotel fire at the age of 38. Rag Man’s D.J. friend Nuke (Simmons) presents him with the only copy of Curr’s last album, which will be played Halloween night at midnight. “Rag Man” begins hearing Satanic messages from the album when he plays it backwards, spurring him to revenge against those kids at school who have tormented him. The wrath goes too far even for Rag Man when one of Sammi’s tunes causes one girl’s ear to melt! Before long, Sammi Curr materializes in the flesh—still burned from his own death—and he’s ready to go to the school dance for his final performance, unless Rag Man can stop him.

COMMENTARY: The nihilistic punk rock movement in the early 1980s gave way to an even darker form of popular music by mid-decade. Born of “Thrash” Metal came Death Metal, notable for shrieked vocals and a thematic obsessions with blood, death and Satan. Bands like Death played songs with titles such as “Scream Bloody Gore,” “Regurgitated Guts,” “Sacrificial” and the homage “Evil Dead.”

Many disenfranchised American teens took immediately to this new, darker form of rock ‘n’ roll, especially if they already had a predilection to view life through the “dark” lens of an outsider. Naturally, concerned parents were terrified of this new form of music (as concerned parents were once frightened by the so-called “devilish” appeal of Elvis and Buddy Holly). Some parents even became convinced that the Death Metal music contained subliminal Satanic messages if played backwards (recorded backwards in an episode of “back casting”).

This issue reached critical mass in December of 1985 when two

teenage boys attempted suicide after allegedly listening to a Judas Priest album and hearing the subliminal message “Do it.” The case went to trial in 1990, but in the five years between the incident and the trial, parents (especially Christian conservative parents) feared that their children were being unduly influenced by Devil-worshiping, long-haired rock ‘n’ rollers.

Given the popularity of Death Metal in the 1980s, perhaps it was only a matter of time before some clever filmmaker produced a movie in which the Devil (or a proxy, anyway) truly *was* communicating through rock. Thus, in 1986, the advent of *Trick or Treat*. In this ripped-from-the-headlines, low-budget horror effort, a boy who believes that “rock’s chosen warriors will rule the apocalypse” and who decorates his room with posters of Anthrax and Ozzy Osbourne, gets more than he bargained for when he plays backwards the final album of the late, great Sammi Curr, an antisocial, controversial musician known for suggestive lyrics and theatrical stunts.

When the boy, Rag Man, is shunned and humiliated at school (and nearly killed in a practical joke involving a swimming pool and weights), he strikes back. To the tune of “This Boy’s Had Enough,” Rag Man leads his tormenters on a merry chase and eventually turns the tables. One especially nasty jock, a blow-dried bully played with creepy charm by Doug Savant, gets his head caught in a woodworking industrial machine and nearly has his head drilled.

Some critics call films such as *Trick or Treat* a “worm turns” tale because a loner-type sticks up for himself and gets back at his enemies (see also: *Evilspeak*). The progenitor of films such as *Trick or Treat* appears to be the 1976 box office hit, *Carrie*, which speaks in much the same vocabulary and with many of the same characters and locales: high schools, jocks, practical jokes, ritual humiliation, cheerleaders, proms and the like.

What differentiates *Trick or Treat* slightly from this template is that once the worm turns, he turns *back*. Rag Man realizes that Sammi Curr is too hardcore Satanic for his taste (my goodness, his music actually melts eardrums) and attempts to stop his killing spree, thus emerging from the film as its protagonist, not a misanthrope.

Overall, *Trick or Treat* is good fun. It’s peppered with scary jolts and disgusting gore, and it makes a thorough mockery of the premise that rock ‘n’ roll is evil or somehow Satanic. The Reverend Gilstrom calls rock “pornography” and its practitioners “out-and-out sick people.” By the way, the good Christian Reverend is played by none other than

Ozzy Osbourne, and the musician enunciates his rock-hating message with a perfect combination of hypocritical morality and holier-than-thou piety. At the end of the film, still in character, Osbourne states (post-credits) “This could kick you off into becoming an absolute pervert...”

Well, not quite. But one must laugh at those concerned parents who so much feared the music of the next generation, neglecting to realize that it was their culture of death and cruelty the next generation was responding to in creating Death Metal. And indeed, these protesting parents were the very ones who once detected value and even liberation in Elvis, the Beatles and other “revolutionaries.” The movie acknowledges this hypocrisy in an off-handed manner by having a parent dress up in costume as Rambo, the Communist-exterminator played by Sylvester Stallone and so popular in that era. Now there’s a good, healthy, role model for youngsters, right?

Troll

★ ★

Critical Reception

“Of the John Carl Buechler rubber monster movies made for Charles Band, this one’s probably the best. How sad is that? Interesting cast, and includes a character named Harry Potter. They seemed to be churning out rubber monster movie movies every other week there for a while.”—William Latham, author *Eternity Unbound, Mary’s Monster, Space: 1999—Resurrection.*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Noah Hathaway (Harry Jr.); Michael Moriarity (Harry Potter); Shelley Hack (Ann Potter); Jenny Beck (Wendy Potter); Sonny Bono (Mr. Dickinson); Phil Fondacaro (Malcolm Malory/Troll); Brad Hall (William Daniels); Anne Lockhart (Young Eunice); Julia Louis-Dreyfus (Janette Cooper); Gary Sandy (Duke Taybor); June Lockhart (Eunice St. Clair); Robert Hathaway (First Policeman); Janus Beck (Second Policeman); Dale Wyatt (Dickinson’s Girlfriend); Barbara Sciorilli, Viviana Giusti, Jessie Carfora (Fairies).

CREW: Empire Pictures presents a Charles Band Production. *Director of Photography:* Romano Albani. *Production Designer:* Giovanni Natalucci. *Film Editor:* Lee Percy. *Troll Creatures created by:* John Carl Buechler. *Special Effects Makeup:* Mechanical and Makeup Images, Inc.

Casting: Anthony Barnao. *Music:* Richard Band. *Associate Producer:* Debra Dion. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Roberto Bessi. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Written by:* Ed Naha. *Produced by:* Albert Band. *Directed by:* John Carl Buechler. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A troll named Torok (Fondacaro) abducts little Wendy Potter (Jenny Beck) when her brother Harry (Noah Hathaway) and parents (Hack, Moriarity) move into an apartment building in San Francisco, then takes her shape. Disguised as the little girl, the monstrous creature sets about transforming apartment residents into elements of his fairy tale world, starting with the upstairs playboy, Dickinson (Bono), whom he transfers into a tree-bearing pod. Duke Taybor (Sandy), a conservative blowhard, is the next to get the troll treatment and is morphed into diminutive inhabitants of the troll's land. The troll turns another resident, Janette (Louis-Dreyfus), into a wood-sprite, and then sets his sights on the only person in the whole building who can actually stop him, Eunice St. Claire (June Lockhart), a long-lived witch and the troll's former wife! When Eunice is also struck down in battle, it's up to Harry to save his sister and fight a dragon conjured by the troll. And he'd better hurry, because Torok's world begins to sprout out of the apartment onto the roof and streets of San Francisco.

COMMENTARY: *Troll* is structured like a slasher film, but it's a rubber reality horror movie concerning transformation and body image. Perhaps more notably, John Carl Buechler's film picks up on another 1980s trend: little monsters. Like *Gremlins* (1984), *Ghoulies* (1985), *Critters* (1986) and even *Child's Play* (1988), the terror in *Troll* arrives in a small package—in this circumstance a fairly, rubbery, unconvincing package, but a small one nonetheless.

The makers of *Troll* didn't hedge their bets when conceiving this film, based on its similarities to so many other horror films from the Reagan decade. In fact, they seemed to go out of their way to cast familiar genre faces in important roles. The cast includes: Noah Hathaway and Anne Lockhart, who were on *Battlestar Galactica*; Jenny Beck, who was the "Star Child" in *V: The Final Battle* and the opening episode of *V: The Series*; Gary Sandy from *WKRP in Cincinnati*; Sonny Bono from *Sonny and Cher*; and June Lockhart from *Lost in Space*. Also, the always off-his-rocker Michael Moriarity (*Q* [1982], *The Stuff* [1985], *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive* [1987]) and Shelley Hack appear for good measure. Sad to say that most of them give corny or downright embarrassing performances. There's a moment when Moriarity sings and dances around his apartment that might be the

actor's career low. Gary Sandy also suffers, playing a crazy conservative Marine who hates "liberal scum," and exaggerates his character's quirks to the point of being cartoonish.

Still, *Troll* features some gentle humor, and that's nice. Faced with a topsy turvy fairy tale world, Moriarity deadpans nicely and says that he's going to do what the tree tells him to do. Also, it should be noted that the troll isn't a villain so much as just a homesick little critter who wishes to make our world more fantastic, like his. With the neighbors he's surrounded by, who can blame him?

As is typical for a Band-Empire film, *Troll* looks cheap, is shot mostly indoors, on relatively few sets, and the filmic style is inspired by television all the way. This decision about visualization makes the film relatively undistinguished visually, even though it's a fascinating conceit that the troll's ring turns people into facets of his world (trees, creatures, etc.).

In the slasher genre, the murderer takes a knife and butchers people. In *Troll*, there's the same lead-up, but then something wondrous and fanciful (if painful looking) occurs. This was a novel way to maintain the "set piece" structure of the paradigm while offering a new twist on rubber reality. Only in *Troll*, the reality is a little too rubbery. It's fine to showcase effects if they're good; foolish to do so if not.

Vamp ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Director Wenk tries for a stylish look, but mostly it comes out as shots of strippers on stage, shots through strippers' legs and colored spotlights illuminating alleyways and tunnels."—Martin Moynihan, "Vamp: A Bloody Bad Try at Comedy Camp Movie," *The Times Union*, September 23, 1986, page B5.

"...a gruesome film, grueling to sit through. It is sleazy, tawdry and disgusting."—Carole Kass, "Vamp: Gross and Grueling," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 19, 1986, page B8.

"[T]hanks to Jones' impressive presence, a suitably ghoulish production and some vivid (as in gory) special effects, *Vamp* works fairly well as a horror pageant with a twist."—Yardena Arar, "Jones Mesmerizing in Uneven *Vamp*," *Daily News of Los Angeles*, July 18,

Cast and Crew

CAST: Chris Makepeace (Keith); Sandy Baron (Vic); Robert Rusler (A.J.); Dedee Pfeiffer (Amaretto/Allison); Gedde Watanabe (Duncan); Grace Jones (Katarina); Billy Drago (Snow); Brad Logan (Vlad); Lisa Lynch (Cimmaron); Jim Bugle (Frat Leader); Trudel Williams (Dragon Girl); Paunita Nichols (Maven); Tricia Brown (Candi); Robin Kaufman (Little Girl).

CREW: New World Pictures, in association with Baker Film Investors, presents a Donald P. Borchers Production. *Casting:* Linda Francis. *Production Designer:* Alan Roderick-Jones. *Costume Designer:* Betty Madden. *Associate Producer:* Susan Gelb. *Film Editor:* Marc Grossman. *Supervising Sound Editor:* Gregg Barbanell. *Special Makeup Effects:* Greg Cannom. *Director of Photography:* Elliot Davis. *Music Composed and Arranged by:* Jonathan Elias. *Choreography:* Russell Clark. *Stunt Coordinator:* Dar Robinson. *Story:* Donald P. Borchers, Richard Wenk. *Screenplay by:* Richard Wenk. *Producer:* Donald R. Borchers. *Director:* Richard Wenk. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: “That doesn’t make them bad people...”—An After Dark Club patron’s offhand retort to Keith’s terrified declaration that all the strippers and employees are vampires. From *Vamp*.

SYNOPSIS: In hopes of gaining membership to the hottest fraternity on campus, college buddies Keith (Makepeace) and A.J. (Rusler) search for a stripper to attend an upcoming frat party.

They borrow a car from their nerdy friend, Duncan (Watanabe), who insists on going with them to the big city. The trio ends up in a bad part of town, at the ominously named After Dark Club. Once there, Keith meets an old acquaintance, Amaretto (Pfeiffer), who is now a stripper, and A.J. is seduced—and then brutally murdered—by the kinky, exotic dancer Katrina (Grace), actually an ancient Egyptian vampire!

A night of terror ensues as Keith and Amaretto battle a gang of Albinos, vampire strippers, and even more dangers. If they are to escape the trap of the vampires at the club, who feed on transients, they’ll need to confront Katrina herself.

COMMENTARY: It’s *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* meets *Fright Night* in *Vamp*, an exaggerated horror comedy that features some witty lines, a unique visual palette, and a show-stopping striptease from that odd

1980s phenomenon, Grace Jones. Hovering somewhere beneath the umpteen vampire clichés that pepper the film, there's also an unique subtext about modern American society, and the suburbanite's fear of the "other," the ones who populate the poor urban areas where police don't go.

A viewer can tell this film was made in the 1980s, because today, it isn't nearly so difficult to find a stripper. Still it's that "hero's journey" that precipitates the action in *Vamp*. The early scenes, set among the vapid and cheesy adolescent world of the college fraternity, don't give one much hope that the movie is going to be any good, but the film literally takes a turn for the better once the journey has begun. While so many '80s horror movies pursued the more realistic, naturalistic style of savage cinema and fare like *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *Vamp* proves a descendant of the more theatrical, fantastic template. To wit, the boys drive to the city, but they arrive to the "bad section" of town almost as lifted there by a tornado. The car spins around and around and suddenly the car is smack down in the city. "We're not in Kansas, any more" the characters realize, making the fantasy reference explicit.

Also, *Vamp* is lit with a canny eye towards the unreal, the over-the-top, the artificial rather than the gritty. Unlike a genuinely sleazy movie (like Lucio Fulci's *The New York Ripper* [1987]), Richard Wenk's film overdoses on green and red neon (much like *A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* [1988]). This palette is garish, with wet streets bathed in emerald light. Even the sewers aren't depicted realistically, but rather in exaggerated shades of red and pink. The movie's lighting scheme, which is occasionally hard on the eyes, reflects its themes and content: that what the boys detect in the big, brightly lit city isn't necessarily "real." Like the strippers, who appear to be one thing, but aren't, the city appears to be a neon wonderland, when—in fact—it's the Vampire District. This is, once more, the duality of "don't worry be happy/be afraid, be very afraid." An image or illusion cloaks a dangerous underside.

Late in the film, there's a great shot at street level (through a street grate) that reveals to Keith the true nature of the "city." Kindergarten-aged vampires sitting on a stoop go for the jugular, literally, during a surprise moment. The interesting thing here is not kiddie vampires, but that they sit on their porches late at night, unwatched by the police, and with apparently no place to go. The truth is, this part of the city is a slum, where society dumps problems (like vampires). The film evidences a fear of the racial other, here vampires, who inhabit cities. It's no accident that the heroes are from a suburb, a town, and

that the big city represents horror. “Home is a million miles away,” A.J. tells Keith, and he’s absolutely correct. The city has taken him and made him a junkie (for blood, not drugs, which one vampire affirms “is a nasty habit”), and so it’s threatening nature to the “innocent” is made abundantly plain. Appetites can be sated in the city, a place where different social and racial groups, even the undead, prey on the weak and naive. “This is not a nice area, and I don’t like to come to it,” a visiting cop, an example of useless authority, opines in the film.

Vamp is cheesy and silly, and overall a fine companion piece to films such as *Fright Night*. Occasionally—when it leaves the teen milieu behind—it’s also quite hypnotic. Once the movie gets to the After Dark Club, it makes the most of the stripping venue. The club is a dive, and funny double entendres welcome each stripper to the stage. A dance in a construction helmet is called a “builder of major erections,” for instance. But it isn’t fun and games when Katrina (Grace Jones) takes the stage. She doesn’t just take it, she owns it and walks away with it. Bizarre, feral, earthy and sexy, her show captures precisely *Vamp*’s thematic point: that the city offers tastes dangerous and exotic ... but ultimately irresistible.

After Katrina’s dance, an aroused A.J. goes backstage to meet her, and his death sequence begins as a tease, continues into seduction, and then progresses to brutal murder. As Katrina licks A.J.’s unsheathed abdomen and works her way up to his neck, she forces his hands behind his back so he can’t defend himself. Again, the illusion: A.J. believes he’s going to get lucky. The truth is that the people who live in this part of town are predators, and Grace turns into a feral, animalistic beast who sees his neck only as a source of food. In an age when “welfare queens” were often derided by officials in Washington as living off the largess of the American people, the vampires featured in film literalize that notion. These city dwellers suck the life from visiting suburbanites in a part of town where vice is exploited.

Vamp climaxes with a fairly typical vampire death scene, replete with all the bells and whistles one has come to expect of such a spectacle. Daylight is what defeats Katrina, and the dying Egyptian princess’s last act is one of defiance. She gives Keith the finger, a final indication that this out-of-his-depth white kid from the suburbs may have won this battle, but she is still unbowed.

In 1989, *Fright Night 2* would also feature a female vampire, but she is but a shadow of Grace Jones’ odd, elegant, enigmatic queen of the night.

Witchboard

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Todd Allen (Jim); Tawny Kitaen (Linda Brewster); Stephen Nichols (Brandon); Kathleen Wilhoite (Zarabeth); Burke Byrnes (Lt. Dewhurst); James W. Quinn (Lloyd); Rose Marie (Mrs. Moses); Judy Tatum (Doctor); Gloria Hayes (Wanda); J.P. Luebsen (Malfeitor); Susan Nickerson (Chris); Ryan Carroll (Roger); Kenny Rhodes (Mike); Claire Bristol (Anchorman).

CREW: Paragon Arts International presents a Kevin Tenney Film. *Director of Photography:* Roy H. Wagner. *Film Editors:* Daniel Duncan, Stephen J. Waller. *Sound:* Lee Haxall. *Associate Producer:* Roland Carroll. *Casting:* Rebecca Boss. *Art Director:* Sarah Burdick. *Supervising Producer:* Ron Mitchell. *Music:* Dennis Michael Tenney. *Theme Performed by:* Steel Breeze. *Theme Composed by:* Dennis Michael Tenney. *Executive Producer:* Walter Josten. *Produced by:* Gerald Geoffray. *Written and Directed by:* Kevin S. Tenney. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

INCANTATION: “E V I L.”—The Ouija Board’s four-letter answer to the question, “Who is terrorizing Linda?” in *Witchboard*.

SYNOPSIS: Linda (Kitaen) and Jim (Allen) throw a party at their apartment, and her ex-boyfriend Brandon (Nichols) uses his Ouija board to contact the spirit of a dead ten-year-old boy named David. Unfortunately, the night goes badly when the party guests disrespect David, and Brandon leaves in a huff, without his Ouija.

Later, Linda begins to use the Ouija board, and her personality starts to undergo dramatic change that Brandon fears is symptomatic of “progressive entrapment,” a spiritual attempt to possess the living using the Ouija as a portal. Brandon also suspects that a series of deadly accidents, including the bizarre death of a medium named Zarabeth (Wilhoite), are the results of spirit David’s anger. He and Jim—romantic rivals for Linda’s affection—set out to learn all they can about David.

What they find, however, is another, far more malevolent spirit, that of a dead, axe-wielding serial killer named Malfeitor (Luebsen). This madman is possessing Linda and will do anything to keep her body,

including commit murder.

COMMENTARY: Don't disrespect the Ouija board! That's one lesson of *Witchboard*, but not the only one. In fact, the big message here is one for macho men: show your emotions; tell your woman you love her!

Seriously, *Witchboard* concerns a love triangle of sorts between an open, thoughtful (even vaguely homosexual) man named Brandon, a beautiful woman, Linda, and a closed-off construction worker, Alpha male-type, Jim. The movie labors to inform viewers that as long as she has known Jim, Linda has never seen him cry. Instead, he reacts to bad news with a bad temper and physical violence. He's an emotional child. However, through his odyssey with Brandon (which coincidentally involves the two of them in a motel room together) to save Linda from progressive entrapment, he learns the value of emotions. Brandon opens Jim up. "What happened to us, man? We used to be like brothers?" Under Brandon's sensitive auspices, Jim finally learns to cry.

Besides rehabilitating Jim, *Witchboard* also attempts to make a statement about drugs, likening the Ouija board to a narcotic. "I think Linda's been using my Ouija," Brandon worries, afraid she can't handle it. "Pretty soon, all she'll want to do is use the board." This is progressive entrapment: At first Linda uses the board infrequently, but soon is having it do everything for her, including finding her missing diamond ring.

Although *Witchboard* features several creepy sequences, including a shocking dream sequence decapitation and one where a spirit's bad spelling generates suspense, the film's attempts at humor (particularly in regards to a medium) fall flat. The characters in the film come off as cheesy and a bit goofy, rather than as genuine people, particularly Brandon. The "love conquers all" narrative line provokes laughs.

When I first saw the film in 1986 I was seventeen years old and really liked it. I didn't notice then how bad the performances were, I didn't realize how sparse the production values were, and how the somber, serious undertone is undercut by comedic moments. *Witchboard*'s script also requires the characters to make very stupid decisions, and that further undercuts the film. For instance, Brandon insists he is responsible for David because he controlled the Ouija board when they first contacted him. Then, without a second glance, he "accidentally" leaves the board sitting on a table in someone else's house at a party, between beers? The movie can't decide, is Brandon

serious (don't disrespect the board!) about Ouija to the degree that he treats it as almost a religion, or not? He can't both be "responsible" and leave the board at a party. It had to be one or the other, yet the script demands both.

The investigation of the dead serial killer, a lame Nancy Drew bit, also comes across as silly child's play. The medium Zarabeth's research about Malfeitor consists of her walking to her desk, leafing through a few pages and "stumbling" across a black-and-white photo of her suspect. Wow, that was tough! It could scarcely have been easier had she snapped her fingers and the photo appeared on her palm.

LEGACY: *Witchboard* was a hit on home video and spawned two direct-to-video sequels, *Witchboard 2: The Devil's Doorway* (1993) and *Witchboard III: The Possession* (1995). Beware of progressive entrapment.

The Wraith

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Amazingly, this ambitious teen-horror-car flick manages to hit on all cylinders ... Writer director Mike Marvin doesn't waste much time on explanations for this brainless nonsense; he just lets it rip."—Mike Mayo, *Videohound's Horror Show: 999 Hair-Raising, Hellish and Humorous Movies*, Visible Ink Press, 1998, page 395.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Charlie Sheen (Jake); Nick Cassavetes (Packard); Sherilyn Fenn (Keri); Randy Quaid (Loomis); Matthew Barry (Billy); Griffin O'Neal (Oggie); Jamie Bozian (Gutterboy); Clint Howard (Rughead); Chris Nash (Minty); David Sherill (Skank); Vickie Benson (Waitress); Peter Melhuse (Murphy); Michael Hungerford (Stokes); Christopher Bradley (Jamie).

CREW: New Century Productions Ltd. Presents an Alliance Entertainment, a John Kemeny Production of a Mike Marvin Production. *Director of Photography:* Reed Smoot. *Visual Consultant:* Marilyn Vance. *Film Editors:* Scott Conrad, Gary Rocklen. *Music:* Michael Hoenig, J. Peter Robinson. *Executive Producer:* Buck Houghton. *Producer:* John Kemeny. *Stunts Designed and Coordinated by:* Buddy Joe Hooker. *Visual Effects Produced by:* VCE/Peter Kuran.

Casting: Ilene Starger. *Written and Directed by:* Mike Marvin. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jake (Sheen) comes to town on his bike to challenge the local tyrant, a psychotic road pirate, drag racer and car thief named Packard (Cassavetes). Packard rules the town with his gang and runs a chop shop, and he has staked his claim on the most beautiful girl around, Keri (Fenn). In fact, Packard killed her last boyfriend, Jamie, in a fit of rage. The mysterious Jake seems hellbent on avenging that murder.

A bizarre figure driving a supercharged car keeps reappearing on deserted roads to drag race Packard's minions, killing them in blazing wrecks. A cop (Quaid) investigates these deaths, but one of Packard's thugs, Rughead (Howard), comes closest to realizing the truth: This helmeted figure and turbo-charged car are supernatural—*wraiths*—returned to Earth to right a terrible wrong.

COMMENTARY: What if Clint Eastwood's *The Man with No Name* (the lead character in such Sergio Leone spaghetti Westerns such as *A Fistful of Dollars* [1967]) drove a car?

The Wraith is a high-octane horror-action film that translates familiar Western archetypes to modern times, with a supercharged car replacing the traditional steed, a futuristic racing uniform substituting for cowboy hats and boots, and road bandits (a car theft ring) replacing rustlers. Set in Arizona, the movie even sees the sympathetic lawman archetype resurrected by Randy Quaid, who gets to crib a line from John Carpenter's *The Thing* ("He's weird and pissed off").

In *Pale Rider*, another Western (and also a film made in the 1980s), Eastwood played a second Man With No Name, a stranger who freed the people from a place held in thrall to bad guys. More importantly, here was speculation that he was back from the dead. *The Wraith* suggests the same answer in terms of its titular character, played by Charlie Sheen. This means he gets to spout cryptic dialogue to damsel in distress Sherilyn Fenn, a girlfriend in his former life: "I've come a very long ways for you ... and my time is just about over."

The Wraith himself is a driver in a space age suit and helmet. The critical viewer may wonder where this ostensibly supernatural creature inherited or purchased all of his beyond-the-state-of-the-art equipment, including the film's real star, the Turbo Interceptor. Were there instructions for driving this thing in the glove compartment?

The movie distracts attention away from such questions by front-loading the production with good road level moving shots during road chases and pursuits. The camera (often mounted on cars) speeds across winding highway roads, not unlike scenes in *The Road Warrior* (1982), and accordingly car chases are fast-paced and impressive. In one witty scene, the Turbo Interceptor seems to descend from the Heavens behind gang leader Packard's car, and the shot is a clever nod to a similar moment with a UFO in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

The Wraith doesn't hedge its bets when it comes to appealing to every demographic available. It's a film that echoes the archetypal Western with its characters and simultaneously nods to the vigilante trend in 1980s movies. It features intense death scenes that reflect a supernatural, Biblical nature (all the Wraith's victims end up with their eyes burned out). It offers horror movie villains (an over-the-top road gang with names like Skank and Gutterboy) and even genuflects to the American adolescent's love affair with the automobile. These qualities makes the film a distillation of everything that's classic Americana, but with Ozzy Osbourne, Robert Palmer and Billy Idol on the soundtrack, the fast-paced, high-revving film definitely skews young.

At times during *The Wraith*, the careful viewer may decry some of the dialogue ("Road blocks won't stop something that can't be stopped!") or object to the fact that at times Charlie Sheen seems to be guest starring in his own movie. But overall this an enjoyable and original fantasy, especially if one looks for connections to the American frontier story, and the legend of a loner who rides into town on a white horse (or in a Turbo Charger) to take justice into his own hands.

1987

January 5: President Reagan undergoes surgery for prostate cancer.

February 26: The Tower commission concludes that Reagan was not in control of his National Security apparatus during the Iran-Contra incident.

May 5: Iran-Contra hearings begin in Congress.

May 8: Gary Hart, a seeming shoo-in for the Democratic party's presidential nomination, drops out of the race after the press uncovers photographs of the married politician aboard a ship called the Monkey Business with young mistress Donna Rice.

May 31: Reagan makes his first speech about AIDS since the epidemic began in 1982.

June 12: At the Berlin Wall, Reagan publicly demands of Mr. Gorbachev, "Tear down this wall!"

July 7–9: On live TV, Oliver North testifies before Congress about his role in the Iran-Contra scandal.

October 14: A little girl named Jessica falls down a well, and after several hours of being trapped there, is rescued. The incident becomes a full-fledged media event thanks to the presence of TV cameras.

October 19: The Dow Jones falls a jaw-dropping 508 points in one day. This is the worst one-day decline in U.S. history. This date comes to be known as "Black Monday."

October 23: By a vote of 58–42, the U.S. Senate rejects Reagan's nominee to sit on the Supreme Court, Robert Bork. This is the largest rejection vote in American history.

November 5: Douglas Ginsburg, Reagan's replacement nominee after Bork is rejected, admits to smoking pot in the 1960s and a few times in the 1970s too. On November 7, Ginsburg asks Reagan to withdraw his nomination.

November 18: The Iran-Contra committee finds Reagan "responsible" for not upholding his oath of office and faithfully executing the laws. Attorney General Edwin Meese is also singled out for failing to adequately serve the president.

Angel Heart

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[I]t’s a lavishly somber piece of hokum—*The Exorcist* for people who haunt bookshops specializing in metaphysics. It’s the sort of movie that makes you think better of Ken Russell’s hyperbolic perversity.”—Pauline Kael, *Hooked, A Williams Abraham Book*, 1989, page 286.

“Alan Parker’s atmosphere-drenched adaptation of William Hjortsberg’s 1978 novel takes its share of liberties with the book’s narrative and locales, but it remains effectively faithful to its memorable melding of pulp detective story and supernatural voodoo tale.”—Cyril Pearl, “The Name’s Cypher, Louis Cypher,” *Video Business*, May 3, 2004, page 11.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mickey Rourke (Harold R. Angel); Robert De Niro (Louis Cyphre); Lisa Bonet (Epiphany Proudfoot); Charlotte Rampling (Margaret Krusemark); Stocker Fontelieu (Ethan Krusemark); Brownie McGhee (Toots Sweet); Michael Higgins (Dr. Fowler); Elizabeth Whitcraft (Connie); Elliott Keener (Sterne); Charles Gordone (Spider-Simpson); Dann Florek (Winesap); Kathleen Wilhoite (Nurse); George Beck (Izzy); Judith Drake (Izzy’s Wife); Gerald Orange (Pastor John).

CREW: Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna Present an Alan Parker film. **Music:** Trevor Jones. **Film Editor:** Gerry Hambling. **Casting:** Risa Bramon, Billy Hopkins. **Production Design:** Brian Morris. **Director of Photography:** Michael Seresin. **Executive Producers:** Mario Kassar, Andrew Vajna. **Based on the novel** Falling Angel by: William Hjortsberg. **Screenplay by:** Alan Parker. **Produced by:** Alan Marshall, Elliott Kastner. **Directed by:** Alan Parker. **MPAA Rating:** R **Running time:** 112 minutes.

INCANTATION: “The flesh is weak, Johnny. Only the soul is immortal. And yours ... belongs to me!”—Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) has his priorities straight in *Angel Heart*.

SYNOPSIS: The strange, sardonic Louis Cyphre (De Niro) enlists the services of a down-on-his-luck gumshoe, Harry Angel (Rourke), in 1955 New York City, hoping to find out what became of a crooner named Johnny Favorite who returned from the war with amnesia. Cyphre had a contract with Favorite regarding the transfer of “certain collateral” upon his demise and so Cyphre wants to learn if he is still

among the living. Angel begins his investigation with a former doctor, who reveals that Favorite left the hospital twelve years earlier, but has been covering for him ever since. His next lead, Madam Zhora, takes him to Louisiana where he meets Margaret Krusemark (Rampling), one of Johnny's lovers. The mystery leads to the bayou and voodoo priestess Epiphany Proudfoot (Bonet). While his client grows ever more impatient for results, Angel starts to make odd discoveries linking Johnny Favorite to his own past.

COMENTARY: In the *film noir* tradition, the past is never really dead. In fact, it lives and breathes right alongside the present. Virtually every private dick's latest case inevitably leads back to some facet of his own history that he would rather forget. Based on William Hjortsberg's novel *Falling Angel*, *Angel Heart* is a genre-blender, combining the settings of the *film noir* and the detective aesthetic with a supernatural, even demonic overtone.

Harry Angel's search for the mysterious Johnny Favorite is a search, in the end, for himself and his own past. As he learns at conclusion, he's actually hunting himself. He's Johnny Favorite, having undergone a bloody voodoo ritual to steal the identity of the "real" Harry Angel and evade his bargain with the Devil (his soul for stardom as a crooner). Watching Mickey Rourke play these final, devastating scenes of realization is a treat. He almost self-destructs on camera, giving a great wasted kind of performance. He always looks a shambles in the film, soaked in sweat and kind of twitchy, but he outdoes himself in the surprise finale.

Angel Heart is also a beautifully vetted film, with terrific period designs and impressive Louisiana locations. Although during the time of its release, *Angel Heart* was marked with an X-rating for an explicit sex scene between Mickey Rourke and *Cosby Show* star Lisa Bonet (playing father and daughter in the film), the picture has aged well and that controversy doesn't impact one's enjoyment of the proceedings.

Indeed, most of the film has a good sense of gallows humor. Robert De Niro plays Louis Cyphre—The Devil, Lucifer—with a wink and a nod. In one scene, he obsessively peels the shell from an egg and talks with Angel. "Some religions think the egg is the symbol of the soul. Did you know that?" he asks. Then, never cracking a smile, he eats the egg, metaphorically the soul. At another juncture, the taunting Satan admonishes Harry to mind his language, and the impression is fostered of a diabolical man who knows exactly what he's doing and whom he's really dealing with. A close reading of the film, of course,

suggests that the Devil knows from his first meeting that he has, in fact, found Johnny Favorite. Now he wants Angel to find him.

A few clues as to Angel's alternate identity are provided in the film. One character figuring in the investigation says, "she used to know a boy" with the same birthday as Johnny Favorite, a possible tip-off. At another moment, the unique lifeline on Harry's open palm gives him away to fortune teller Krusemark. Finally, Angel is bedeviled, literally, by strange visions, images the audience at first takes for phantasms from post-traumatic stress involved with the war.

Instead, these images (almost always of a very industrial looking fan) relate to the hotel room where Favorite made the identity switch with Angel. Later, the dream images recur and expand to include a bloody shirt and the image of a woman in black turned away from the camera. This odd world is the note on which the film ends: Harry is depicted in an old elevator, going straight down ... presumably to Hell.

By turns erotic and mysterious, *Angel Heart* is a beautifully crafted film, both bloody and sexy (sometimes in the same scene!). In 1995, Clive Barker would attempt, somewhat less successfully, to again meld the *noir* mystique with the horror genre in *Lord of Illusions*.

The Believers

★ ★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Martin Sheen (Cal Jameson); Helen Shaver (Jessica Halliday); Robert Loggia (Lt. Sean McTaggart); Richard Masur (Marty Wertheimer); Elizabeth Wilson (Kate Maslow); Lee Richardson (Dennis Maslow); Harris Yulin (Robert Calder); Raul Davila (Oscar Sezine); Malick Bowens (Palo); Carla Pinza (Mrs. Ruiz); Jimmy Smits (Tom Lopez); Harley Cross (Chris); Janet-Laine Green (Lisa); Larry Ramos (Diner Counterman); Philip Corey (Calder's Assistant); Eddie Jones (Police Patient).

CREW: A John Schlesinger Film. A Beverly Camhe, Michael Childers Production. *Casting:* Donna Isaacson, John Lyons. *Associate Producer:* Mark Frost. *Music:* J. Peter Robinson. *Costume Designer:* Shay Cunliffe. *Film Editor:* Peter Honess. *Production Designer:* Simon Holland. *Director of Photography:* Robby Muller. *Executive Producer:* Edward Teets. *Based on the book* The Religion by: Nicholas Conde. *Screenplay by:* Mark

Frost. *Produced by*: John Schlesinger, Michael Childe, Beverly Camhe. *Directed by*: John Schlesinger. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 109 minutes.

INCANTATION: “God can’t save you. The Church can’t save you. They get right inside your body. You can’t stop them ... the seven powers. You think you can stop them? You think science can stop them?”—A desperate Tom Lopez (Jimmy Smits) confides in police therapist Cal Jameson (Martin Sheen) in John Schlesinger’s tense and paranoid *The Believers*.

SYNOPSIS: After his wife is electrocuted in a freak accident, Cal Jameson (Sheen) and his young son Chris (Cross) relocate to an apartment in New York City where Cal gets a job counseling policemen.

One of his new patients, Tom Lopez (Smits), is an undercover officer who infiltrated a murderous voodoo cult and is now terrified of its wrath, especially since a personal belonging, his badge, is in the cultists’ hands.

As innocent children are sacrificed in bloody black magic rituals all over the city, Jameson, his new girlfriend (Shaver) and Lt. McTaggart (Loggia) begin to suspect that Lopez’s fears are more than the rambling of a madman.

In fact, a dark conspiracy may reach to the top echelons of New York’s well-to-do, including business guru Robert Calder (Yulin). The object of the cult seems to be Cal’s son, Chris.

COMMENTARY: Some yuppies and businessmen will do positively anything to get ahead ... even call upon the dark gods of voodoo! In a nutshell, that’s the story in *The Believers*, a taut and effective horror thriller that finds likable Martin Sheen coping with a curse that threatens his loved ones.

At times, *The Believers* plays like a superior version of *The Possession of Joel Delaney* (1973), which saw the spirit of a Latino man inhabiting a white man. *The Believers* likewise fears ethnicity. A strange cleaning woman enters Cal’s apartment home and mysteriously sings to Chris. In some impressive street shots, Manhattan resembles not a happy melting pot, but a sinister realm where alien cultures merge and there’s good reason for the Christian white man to fear ethnicity and the foreign. Those poor pagans may just want to steal our children. At least that’s one interpretation, and the film makes the case that

unfortunate white folk can't distinguish good voodoo from bad voodoo.

While *The Believers* plays on this fear of the racial and religious other, the movie climaxes on an entirely different and more typically 1980s note. It turns out that the city's rich upper class have a new "thing" that's all the rage. The upper crust is sacrificing their children (representing the future) to gain fame, wealth and power. Their upward mobility derives not from business, but literally from "voodoo economics," conjured during the practice of Santaria. Harris Yulin plays Calder, a successful entrepreneur who makes the cover of a city magazine for his amazing business acumen. But his success is a result of the fact that five years earlier he forked over his son to the auspices of black magic. It's a dog-eat-dog world, after all. Amusingly, the voodoo cult in *The Believers* consists entirely of men and women who dress in crisp, gray, attractive suits. Business wear is the new "evil" garb in the 1980s horror cinema.

The Believers is frightening throughout, but it reaches its apex of tension when the character played by Helen Shaver is undone by a voodoo curse. She accidentally leaves her makeup compact behind to snoop around in Calder's office, and he gets nasty revenge. When she uses the makeup later, something gets under her beautiful skin. A boil begins to grow and grow on her face, becoming redder and more inflamed in each scene. Finally, in a scene guaranteed to turn the stomach, the pulsating boil swells to capacity, and spiders start to crawl out of a tear. Shaver is a beautiful woman and a good actress, and this scene is disgusting and nasty.

The Believers shares some elements with Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, specifically in the way it posits an evil cult hiding in plain sight in a modern city. And, reflecting the twist in that film, Sheen's friends—who look a lot like limousine liberals, by the way—are behind much of the evil action.

Blood Hook

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mark Jacobs (Peter Van Clease); Lisa Todd (Ann); Patrick Danzi (Rodney); Sara Hauser (Kiersten); Christopher Whiting (Finner); Don Winters (Leroy Leudke); Paul Drake (Wayne Duerst); Dale Dunham

(Denny); Paul Heckman (Sheriff); Don Cosgrove (Roger Swain); Bonnie Lee (Sheila); Greg Nienas (Irving Swain); Julie Cortanz (Ruth-Ann); Donald Franke (Grandpa); Ryan Franke (Young Peter).

CREW: Lloyd Kaufman & Michael Herz Present a Troma Team Release. Spider-Lake Films Limited Partnership and Golden Charger Productions Present a David Herbert Production of a Jim Mallon film. *Director of Photography/Film Editor:* Marsha Kahm. *Music:* Thomas A. Naunas. *Executive Producers:* Lloyd Kaufman, Michael Herz. *Story:* Gail Anderson, David Herbert, James Mallon, Douglas Rand. *Screenplay by:* Larry Edgerton, John Galligan. *Produced by:* David Herbert. *Directed by:* James Mallon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Something’s very fishy...”—A keen observation in the fish-centric slasher film, *Blood Hook*.

SYNOPSIS: Seventeen years after his grandfather (Franke) inexplicably was pulled into the water from a lakeside pier, his grandson Peter Van Clease (Jacobs) returns to the area on vacation with a group of friends. A strange killer is on the loose with a giant hook and fishing rod, reeling victims in and butchering them. His first victim is the suburban mother (Lee) of the Swain family. Soon, it is Peter’s friends who are disappearing, and then his girlfriend is abducted. Peter teams up with a local veteran (who suffers from paranoid delusions) to find the killer, and realizes that the urge to commit murder has something to do with a specific musical note played in conjunction with the sounds of nearby cicadas. But now, who amongst the locals has a plate in his head and might hear those unusual reverberations?

COMMENTARY: James Mallon, who directed *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie* (1996), has a lot of nerve skewering other genre movies when he has a skeleton like the atrocious *Blood Hook* in his own closet. This is a dire, poorly conceived slasher, and though the box art indicates that *Blood Hook* was designed to be funny, that’s an intention that clearly did not translate to the finished product. Like so many of the worst slasher films, *Blood Hook* is a genuine bore rather than a lively example of the form.

The world of fishing provides the location (Lake Muskie), the weapon of the killer (a fishing rod and hook), the red herrings (all fishermen) and the villain himself (a fisherman with a metal plate in his skull). The fishing leitmotif even helps explain what the killer is doing: He’s converting his victims into big chunks of chum!

In the deadly preamble, poor old Grandpa gets hooked and pulled into the lake. The seventeen-year gap between the killer's first appearance and his next should be the audience's clue that *Blood Hook* is the second movie of the 1980s (the first being 1981's *The Beast Within*) to concern itself with the life cycle of the cicada.

Much of what occurs in this film is patently absurd and over-the-top. The method of execution depicted here—by fishing line and hook—is ridiculous, but it's depicted in a gory, bloody way, which isn't particularly funny.

What sinks the movie faster than its lack of humor, however, are the gaps in logic. A suburban mom gets hooked on a pier and dragged into the lake while calling to the loons, but her vacationing family doesn't even miss her for much of the film's remaining time, let alone register her absence. How plausible is that, even if she is a shrew the family would be happy to be rid of? And the mystery of the killer's identity rests on a musical note that's "The Devil's Tri-Tone" or some such thing? Again, these leaps in logic gut the film of any sense of verisimilitude.

The thematic thrust of the film finds Peter as the central protagonist. He must learn to be a man, "make some noise" and stand up for himself. This advice ("make some noise") is meant literally, as it is in the act of doing so (generating the Devil's Tri-Tone) that the Muskie killer is ultimately outed, and Peter is able to save his girlfriend and put the deadly past behind him.

Bloody New Year



Cast and Crew

CAST: Suzy Aitchison (Lesley); Nikki Brooks (Janet); Colin Heywood (Spud); Mark Powley (Rick); Catherine Roman (Carol); Julian Ronnie (Tom); Steve Eppson (Dad); Steve Wilscher (Ace); Jon Glentoran (The Bear); Val Graham (Housemaid); David Lynn (Interviewer); Rory Maclean (First Expert); Nick Dowsett (Second Expert).

CREW: *Presented by:* Lazer Entertainment Ltd. *Songs by:* Cry No More. *Incidental Music:* Nick Magnus. *Production Design:* Hayden Pearce. *Film Editor:* Carl Thomson. *Sound Recordist:* Doug Turner. *Director of Photography:* John Shann. *Screenplay:* Frazer Pearce. *Executive Producer:* Maxine Julius. *Production Designer:* Hayden Pearce. *Directed*

by: Norman J. Warren. MPAA Rating: Not available. Running time: 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’m sorry I snapped at you. It’s just that suddenly everything seemed so stupid...”—A young protagonist explains her bad behavior (and basically apologizes for the movie) in the unfortunate *Bloody New Year*.

SYNOPSIS: Five English teenagers and their new American acquaintance wash ashore on an island after their small boat springs a leak. There they find the abandoned Grande Island Hotel, which is still decorated for a New Year’s Eve party from 1959, and seems to be inhabited by ghosts. On the TV, a news report indicates that on the night leading up to 1960, the British government tested a new plane equipped with “anti-radar” technology, but that the device malfunctioned and caused a rip in time and space. The plane crashed on Grande Island, and now the pilot and the 1959 partygoers are trapped in a hellish, eternal limbo, and want the teens to join them ... forever.

COMMENTARY: Should auld acquaintance be forgot, or just brutally murdered?

Somehow, it’s comforting to have evidence that British filmmakers can create a horror movie just as ridiculous, just as incompetent, just as infuriating as any American talent. *Bloody New Year* is a camp hoot, an unintentionally funny horror film concerning a group of teenagers who end up in temporal limbo by visiting an island where a bizarre “anti-radar” experiment went wrong. Now, the teens will experience one night—New Year’s Eve, 1959—for eternity.

And “eternity” is precisely how long this film seems to run.

Essentially an asinine runaround, *Bloody New Year* consists almost entirely of scared young people darting in and out of hotel out-buildings, opening doors to strange locales, running into deadly opponents (like sinister carnival ride operators), and reacting foolishly to off-screen horrors the audience never sees. There are many shots, for instance, of something indistinct hiding in the rustling trees. Scary? Not in the least, in part because even the characters don’t seem to know what to make of these things.

In fact, there’s something terribly wrong with *all* the teens’ reactions, thanks to the film’s terrible, scattershot editing. The characters react too slowly to everything that occurs, perhaps because their reaction

shots were filmed separately, and included in self-contained shots. To wit, helpless comrades are attacked just inches away, and the characters around them just freeze, and react as though trapped in molasses. One death scene even features this terrible sense of timing. A ghost attacks, and oh-so-gently twists off the head of a carnival punk. It's a kind and gentle massacre.

Bloody New Year's dialogue is also unintentionally hilarious. When a young protagonist witnesses a ghostly singer appear and then disappear on stage, the only comment is a nonplussed "Weird." Why, yes, that is weird!

When Spud dies, Janet responds—humorously—with the aghast (yet not terribly concerned) exclamation, "My god ... poor Spud!"

And the most unnecessary dialogue of all comes when the American teen notes helpfully, "We can't go anywhere without a boat."

You think? They are, after all, trapped on an island!

Bloody New Year races breakneck-style from one such absurdity to another, yet there is one moment of palpable terror in the film's ninety minutes. The stranded teens have gathered in the hotel theater to watch a movie, a black-and-white film called *Fiend without a Face*. In a deeply disturbing sequence that presages such efforts as *The Ring* (2002), a character emerges from the silver screen and strangles one of the kids.

That image of fantasy made real boasts some real psychic weight, but in the end it's lost amidst all the running-around, all the chases, and the nonsensical responses.

Blue Monkey



Cast and Crew

CAST: Steve Railsback (Detective James Bishop); Gwynyth Walsh (Rachel Carson); John Vernon (Roger Levering); Joe Flaherty, Robin Duke (The Bakers); Susan Anspach (Judith Glass); Don Lake (Elliott); Helen Hughes (Marwella); Sandy Webster (Fred); Joy Coghill (Dede Wilkins); Ivan E. Roth (The Creature); Stuart Stone (Joey); Marsha Moreau (Marcy); Nathan Adamson (Tyrone); Sarah Polley (Ellen); Cynthia Belliveau (Alice Bradley).

CREW: Sandy Howard presents a William Fruet film. *Casting:* Paul Bengston, David Cohn, Anne Tait. *Associate Producer:* Risa Gertner. *Film Editor:* Michael Fruet. *Art Director:* Reuben Freed. *Creature Effects:* Sirius Effects. *Stunt Coordinator:* Shana Cardwell. *Entomology Consultant:* Steven R. Kitcher. *Director of Photography:* Brenton Spencer. *Original Score:* Patrick Coleman, Paul Novotny. *Written by:* George Goldsmith. *Executive Producer:* Thomas Fox. *Produced by:* Martin Walters. *Directed by:* William Fruet. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

INCANTATION: “We still have a few bugs to iron out.”—Get it? A joke from *Blue Monkey*.

SYNOPSIS: A repairman-landscaper gets pricked by a plant in the garden of kindly old Marwella (Hughes). Unfortunately, the plant is from a mysterious, newly-formed volcanic island in Micronesia, and contains the larvae of an unknown insect. The old man is taken to County Memorial Hospital where the wound is diagnosed as an insect bite and he passes a maggot-like growth from his mouth. Everybody in the hospital, including a cop named Bishop (Railsback), who is visiting his wounded partner, is quarantined. A group of children with leukemia feed the slug-like monster a genetic growth accelerator and the thing enlarges into a huge, murderous insect. Worse, it is ready to reproduce 500 offspring. Bishop, a doctor (Walsh) and an entomologist (Lake) team up to destroy the giant insect.

COMMENTARY: *Blue Monkey* earns a special distinction amongst the worst of the worst. It’s a movie that isn’t merely bad, but actually pain-inducing. This isn’t critical hyperbole on my part, nor a metaphoric description of the monster movie’s hackneyed plot, the ridiculous dialogue or its lethargic pace. Rather, it’s a description of the predicted physiological outcome after a viewing of the film. It actually *hurts* to watch *Blue Monkey* due to one important aspect: its unpleasant lighting scheme. There are blinding blue lights and strobes flashing for long periods, so keep a bottle of aspirin nearby.

Although its central monster isn’t terribly fake-looking, everything else about *Blue Monkey* is substandard. The performances, especially by the female performers, are atrocious. The characters—including a hard-boiled cop (Railsback) and a scientist who wants only to study the insect, played by Don Lake—are two-dimensional. Worse, the movie doesn’t even make much narrative sense. A group of children with terminal leukemia are given free run of the hospital? This is not only inconvenient, since they are the ones who feed the Micronesian insect some growth hormones, but dangerous too, because these

patients should be under close observation. Even the title doesn't make sense. Why is this movie called *Blue Monkey*? The lighting is blue, that's true, but there's no monkey in the film, anywhere. This one should be renamed *Blue Turkey*.

Every hospital movie cliché you can imagine comes into play. A female patient goes into labor at the worst possible time; there's a wrong-headed administrator (played by John Vernon), and the secret to stopping the spread of the monstrous contagion is under the doctor's nose all the time ... alcohol consumption! It takes a drunk old lady to make this fact obvious to Dr. Carson, who is obviously more interested in bedding Dr. Bishop than solving the medical riddle.

As for *Blue Monkey*'s pacing, it's leaden. Most of the movie is a dull back-and-forth around the hospital basement and various corridors. One has to wonder how Don Lake, who later starred in such Christopher Guest movies as *Waiting for Guffman* (1997), *Best in Show* (2003) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), ended up in the thankless role of a dedicated bug scientist, one given to such exclamations as "This is the most efficient insect I've ever seen!" In fact, knowing Lake's association with those Guest-improvised comedies, it's almost more fun to view this movie as one of them. This makes Lake's dialogue absolutely hysterical.

Monster movies didn't have such an easy go of things in the 1980s. First *King Kong Lives*, then *Blue Monkey*. Replete with a schmaltzy ending, *Blue Monkey* gives the viewer a sense of satisfaction only in its closing moments when one character states: "Oh, doc, we need a cure for the hangover!" That's exactly how you'll feel—pounding migraine and all—after ninety minutes with this movie.

A Chinese Ghost Story

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Leslie Cheung (Ning), Wang Tsu Hsien (Old Swordsman); Wo Ma (Hsiao Tsing).

CREW: *Presented by:* Fortune Star and Cinema City Company Ltd. *Screenplay:* Yuen Kai Chi. *Art Director:* Yee Chung Mai. *Costume Designer:* Chan Ku Fang. *Martial Arts Director:* Ching Siu Tung, Kwok Tsu, Lau Chi Ho, Wu Chi Lun. *Original Music:* Romeo Diaz, James Wong. *Production Manager:* Won Kar Man. *Executive Producer:* Claudio

Chung. Produced by: Tsui Hark. Directed by: Ching Siu Tung. Running time: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A hapless traveler and tax collector named Ning (Cheung) spends a night in the haunted Lan Ro Temple, where he encounters a seductive, lute-playing beauty named Hsiao Tsing—a ghost. He falls madly in love with her only to learn that she is betrothed to marry a dark master in the ghost world just three days hence, unless he can stop the wedding and see the way to Hsiao Tsing's reincarnation.

Ning enlists the aid of a cowardly old swordsman (Hsien), but to save Ning's beloved, they will have to battle a Tree Monster, the Dark Master and cross the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

COMMENTARY: If you can conceive of a horror film that mates the gonzo, shaky-cam aesthetics of Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* (1983) with the wire-work and grand storytelling of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), you have a pretty good conception of the high-flying thrills in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. This is a remarkably energetic Asian epic that boasts incredible martial arts stunts, wicked 1980s era physical "monster" effects, and a touching love story to boot.

A Chinese Ghost Story matches *Star Wars*- style archetypal characters (like the Old Master) with a tongue-in-cheek comedic script—which includes dialogue such as "It seems we have to storm Hell!" And then, without batting an eye, the film moves gracefully into action-packed fighting scenes between man and all manners of grotesque supernatural beasts. There's an inspired scene early on in which zombies inhabit the rafters of a temple and attack the film's hero, Ning. Later, he must do battle with an evil woman (the Matron) who boasts a monstrous, fleshy tongue that rolls and uncoils and is quite a nuisance. Tree monsters eventually come into the picture too, and the movie's climax takes the viewer across the boundary between men and ghosts.

A Chinese Ghost Story ends with an endearing and tragic paean to true love, when Ning sets his beloved—whom this entire quest has concerned—on the path to reincarnation. At the same time, he realizes he will never see her again in this lifetime. Out of the blue—this daring, wildly imaginative movie succeeds at plucking the heartstrings too.

In its focus on a siren in white, and with a gliding camera that dances through cemeteries at night while wind howls, *A Chinese Ghost Story*

achieves the aura of a terrifying fairy tale. Filmmakers in the U.S., including John Carpenter, have been heavily influenced by Asian horror—martial arts cinema and films like this one. Watching *A Chinese Ghost Story*, it's easy to see why. The film is imagination unfettered, a world where old rules don't apply and every scene feels fresh and original. Although Ning at times reveals all the charm of a Jar-Jar Binks, the film is otherwise a ninety-minute *tour de force*.

Creepozoids



Cast and Crew

CAST: Linnea Quigley (Blanca); Ken Abraham (Butch); Michael Aranda (Jesse); Richard Hawkins (Jake); Kim McKamy (Kate); Joi Wilson (Woman).

CREW: *Presented by:* UAV Corporation and Titan Productions. *Music Supervisor:* Jonathan Scott Bogner. *Music Composed by:* Guy Moon. *Production Designer:* Royce Mathew. *Special Makeup & Creature Effects by:* Next Generation Effects, Inc., Tom Floutz, Peter Carsillo. *Special Mechanical Effects by:* John Criswell. *Executive in Charge of Production:* David J. Ross. *Casting:* Stan Shaffer. *Director of Photography:* Thomas Callaway. *Film Editor:* Miriam L. Preissel. *Associate Producers:* Ellen Cabot, Linnea Quigley, Rozanne Taucher, Steve Lustgarten, Jackie Snider, Gary P. Ryan. *Stunt Coordinator:* John Stewart. *Special Effects:* Tom Callaway. *Written by:* Burford Hauser, David DeCoteau. *Produced by:* David DeCoteau, John Schouweiler. *Directed by:* David DeCoteau. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 75 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Civilization doesn’t have all the comforts of civilization anymore.”—An observation on a post-nuclear future in *Creepozoids*.

SYNOPSIS: In the year 1998, six years after a nuclear exchange among the superpowers has ravaged the surface of the Earth, five American Army deserters—Jake (Hawkins), Blanca (Quigley), Butch (Abraham), Jesse (Aranda) and Kate (McKamy)—seek refuge from an acid rain storm inside a strange containment laboratory. There, they learn of a top secret experiment involving amino acids, but worse, discover that giant rats and some kind of gigantic monster inhabit the facility. First Jesse is killed, then Butch. Finally, Jake alone survives the battle with the monster and is left to face a new horror when it

regenerates into a semi-human murderous baby with human features.

COMMENTARY: Love that title: *Creepozoids*. Inspired by it, I sometimes call my cats Little Creepozoids. It's a term of affection, really.

Truth be told, the title's probably the most successful aspect of this mercifully short, low-budget "future horror" film that trades on one of the most common fears in 1980s horror cinema, an all-out nuclear war and the fall-out afterwards.

No, scratch that. The best part of *Creepozoids* occurs when Linnea Quigley, playing Blanca, strips down and takes a sudsy, extended shower.

This is the reason that flicks like *Creepozoids* exist, and there's no point denying it.

Otherwise, *Creepozoids*, which appears to have been cheaply shot on video, is a ludicrous hodgepodge of *Aliens*-style genre clichés, and the film fritters away much of its already-insubstantial running time (seventy-five minutes) with repetitive scenes of brawny actors crawling on their bellies up and down a vent shaft leading to a subterranean alien hive. Periodically, the movie cuts away from the action to stock footage of cloudy skies, in a half-hearted effort to suggest a post-nuclear world. However, the stock material doesn't match the early outdoor footage, where it is completely sunny and the sky is a radiant blue.

Creepozoids finds its military men and women fighting a beast that corrupts and perverts the human body. It was genetically engineered by scientists experimenting with amino acids, but the origin of the beast is ultimately beside the point. As one soldier notes, "It's strong and it's smart, and I gotta kill it."

As the deserters fight the monster (as well as oversized rats), many of the guns appear to be toys; eagle-eyed viewers will see that one gun resembles a water pistol. The monster itself is a rubbery, lumbering creation; the film often reveals only the beastie's feet, perhaps in an attempt to keep the poor effects off-camera. The final campaign occurs in a supply room, so that many boxes can fall down on the imperiled protagonists and augment the sense of "excitement."

Creepozoids also boasts a little genre in-joke here and there. For instance, computer read-outs make mention of lab personnel with names such as Forrest Ackerman and Roger Corman. It's a nod (or, in

movie-speak, “an homage”) to those who love the genre, and those who made classic no-budget films with titles such *Night of the Blood Beast* (1958).

And that’s part of the difficulty reviewing a film such as this objectively. It’s solidly in that 1950s tradition of a “no resource” movie, but made by people who obviously love horror. *Creepozoids* is put together by what my wife termed “the senior class,” meaning that it looks amateurish, like a bad student film. That stated, it’s clear that everybody involved has given the project their all, and, being generous now, some of the action scenes aren’t half bad. Better yet, there’s not a horny teenager or mad slasher in sight.

So whereas the makers of *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning*, for instance, feel as though they’re slumming and talking down to their audience, *Creepozoids* evidences the naive, good-natured air of a movie with very few tangible resources, but which is trying, *really* trying, to be as good as *Aliens*. It fails miserably, of course, but sometimes one can take limitations into account and still show a film a little affection.

Good Creepozoids. Nice Creepozoids.

Creepshow 2

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“George Romero’s cinematographer Michael Gornick takes over the director’s chair for this film that probably has better stories than the first film. ‘The Lake’ works particularly well, certainly better than the tale of the wooden Indian, but the hitchhiker story is a classic right out of *The Twilight Zone*. Tom Savini as the Creeper is probably a little too over the top, and the film lacks a certain resonance that Romero brought to the first film, but it’s still diverting and worth a look.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lois Chiles (Annie); George Kennedy (Ray Spruce); Dorothy Lamour (Martha Spruce); Daniel Beer (Randy); Jeremy Green (Lavern); Page Hannah (Rachel); Don Harvey (Randy); David Holbrook (Fatso); Stephen King (Truck Driver); Holt McCallany (Sam); Frank S. Salsedo (Ben); Paul Satterfield (Deke); Tom Wright (The

Hitchhiker); Tom Savini (Creep).

CREW: New World Pictures Presents a Laurel Production, *Creepshow 2*. *Makeup Effects Created by:* Howard Berger, Ed French. *Casting:* Leonard Finger. *Production Design:* Bruce Miller. *Animation Design and Supervision:* Rick Catizone. *Sound Editor:* Jim Shields. *Director of Photography:* Richard Hurt, Tom Hurwitz. *Film Editor:* Peter Weatherly. *Music:* Les Reed. *Additional Music:* Rick Wakeman. *Associate Producer:* Mitchell Galin. *Executive Producer:* Richard P. Rubinstein. *Written by:* George A. Romero. *Based on stories by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* David Ball. *Directed by:* Michael Gornick. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three more tales of terror from the Creep! In the first, a general store's Indian statue comes to life to avenge the senseless and brutal murders of the kindly proprietors, Ray (Kennedy) and Martha (Lamour) Spruce. In the second tale, four weed-smoking, joy-seeking teens journey fifty miles into the country to go swimming at a lake on the first day of winter, but a strange and menacing oil slick-like creature in the water turns out to be the ultimate predator. In the final story, Annie Lansing (Chiles) races home to her lawyer husband after a tryst with a gigolo and accidentally strikes down a hitchhiker (Wright) on a dark road. Driving off without reporting the incident, she is haunted by the spirit of the hitchhiker, who keeps re-appearing—ever more mangled—on Annie's trip home.

COMMENTARY: Although directed by Michael Gornick rather than the better known George A. Romero, *Creepshow 2* is nonetheless a very good sequel to the 1980s, EC Comics tribute, *Creepshow*. If a viewer gets through the opening and closing animated shorts—which are dross—and into the three stories, plenty of scares and jumps are on display.

Unlike its two-hour, five-story predecessor, *Creepshow 2* gets in and gets the job done with a minimum of fuss, clocking in at approximately an hour-and-a-half, and vetting three stories that—frankly—are superior to those featured in the original film. Again, the weakest link is the first story, “Old Chief Wooden Head,” an argument for vigilante justice when young Native American thugs kill the white, elderly owners of a general store. There’s something a tad racist in this story, set in an economically depressed 1980s America, which finds the no-good minority (Indians) leeching off the upstanding white folk. “Good intentions tore this country down, Ray,” Mrs. Spruce says to her bleeding-heart husband. “They’ll take your charity until it dries up, and then they’ll leave you.” Or the loaded statement, “You’re too

good to these people.”

This stance, of a middle-class America burned by the good intentions of social programs like welfare, echoes the conservative argument of the time: good-for-nothing minorities are destroying the country. If they don’t just suck up charity, they’ll resort to crime. And, of course, the villains in the film *do* resort to murderous crime, killing the Spruces, thus permitting a *Death Wish*-type story with supernatural overtones as the young gang members get their just deserts. The villains are depicted in much the same two-dimensional fashion as those appearing in a *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street* film. One guy likes his long silky hair, and took nine years to grow it so he could become a star in Hollywood. Another is hugely obese, et cetera.

The Indian tracks them down to their trailer trash home—where they swill beer and lie on the couch watching TV—and kills them. Although an entertaining story, this first installment panders to the worst instincts of the white, middle-class crowd, depicting two kindly senior citizens being brutally butchered so as to invoke a feeling of blood lust in the audience. It then visits bloody vengeance upon the psychotic criminals who are clearly responsible, yet nonetheless depicted living in virtual squalor. How about some anger directed at the economic policies that destroy towns like the one in this story? Or the tax policies which punish the poor and reward the rich? The anger here seems misdirected; Old Chief Woodenhead should be marching on Congress and the White House with that tomahawk, a greased pompadour his prize.

Creepshow 2’s second tale, “The Raft,” truly gets under the skin. The isolated central location, a lake in the middle of nowhere, is superseded almost immediately by a second, even more isolated location: a tiny raft in the middle of the lake, big enough for only a few people. The story sees four weed-smoking youngsters trapped on this raft as a strange creature circles. At first, the blob-like creature is mistaken for an oil slick, but as one of the characters says, “This thing doesn’t look like an accident.” Before long, it’s eating and digesting the kids within its sticky, tar-like body. The idea here is of man—the superior creature—becoming prey, kicked from the top of the food chain.

Once one of the youngsters is killed (complaining “It hurts” as she’s digested), Gornick provides some disturbing long shots that reveal the isolation of the location. Night comes, then daybreak ... and all the while, the car is parked right there on the shore, visible but unreachable. This gruesome little piece ends with the last survivor

swimming for his life and escaping the monster ... only to find it has a special way of reaching land. This one will leave you with shivers.

The final story, “The Hitchhiker” follows in the tradition of *One Step Beyond*’s “If You See Sally” and *The Twilight Zone*’s “The Hitchhiker.” There’s a long tradition of mythology and horror drama concerning the notion of a traveler seeming some kind of ghostly figure during a night time journey. The concept is handled in far more visceral—and bloody—fashion in this installment, the high point of *Creepshow 2*. Annie, played by Lois Chiles, strikes a hitchhiker, and then attempts to convince herself she can deal with it. “Think. Think rationally,” she instructs herself. “Can you live with this?” That’s literally the question of the tale. Annie believes she *can* live with her trespass, but fate and the cosmic scales of justice won’t let her. The dead hitchhiker keeps showing up, ever more threatening (at one point holding up a sign that reads YOU KILLED ME). In a nice touch, each time the hitchhiker shows up, he’s more rotted and decomposed, and by his last appearance, his jaw appears to be missing. A fact which doesn’t stop him from repeating his hysterical, strangely upbeat refrain: “Thanks for the ride, lady!”

Annie’s guilty conscience is personified in the hitchhiker; or rather, the guilty conscience any moral person should have is personified. The story makes plain that indulgent, rich Annie doesn’t really care about the stranger on the road. All she really cares about is how this incident affects her future. As she drives home to her palatial suburban estate, she obsessively worries about money and how much it will cost to treat her concussion. This, after killing a man. In the garage, when confronted by the ghoul for the last time, she asks the dead hitchhiker how much money he wants, as though cash will solve everything, and absolve her of sin. So this installment is a statement on the yuppie mentality.

Particularly in its last story, which evokes nervous laughter and is funny and effective in a macabre sort of way, *Creepshow 2* serves as an interesting and valuable morality tale. In the first tale, the message is simply that crime doesn’t pay. In the second, the self-involved kid on “The Raft” sacrifices his girlfriend to the monster as a method of escaping its clutches, but then he strays too near the shore to gloat and gets eaten himself. And finally, in “The Hitchhiker,” a yuppie woman who kills a man decides she can live with it, and is vetoed by fate itself.

In each story, a misbehaving character gets a comeuppance, the very crux of the EC aesthetic, and it’s a shame that during the decade of

“greed is good” when avarice was applauded above decency and compassion, forces like the Moral Majority were unable to see films such as *Creepshow 2* for what they were: didactic dramas about human misbehavior and justice. Only with walking wooden Indians, malevolent oil slicks, and ghoulish hitchhikers. And lots and lots of gore.

The Curse

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Yet another version of *The Colour Out of Space* ... It’s more faithful than *Die Monster Die* ... but that doesn’t forgive the abysmal acting, the redneck stereotypes, or the lack of sense in the plot. At least the title fits.”—Tony Whitt, *Cinescape Presents: “H.P.’s Hollywood Horrors.”* November 2001, page 48.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Wil Wheaton (Zachary Hays); Claude Akins (Nathan Hayes); Malcolm Danare (Cyrus Hayes); Cooper Huckabee (Allan Forbes); Amy Wheaton (Alice Hayes); Steve Carlisle (Charlie Davidson); Kathleen Jordan Gregory (Frances); Hope North (Esther); Steve Davis (Mike).

CREW: Trans World Entertainment presents an Ovidio G. Assonitis Production of a David Keith Film. *Casting:* David Kingsley. *Production Designer:* Frank Vanorio. *Director of Photography:* Robert D. Forges. *Associate Producer:* Louis Fulci. *Film Editor:* Claude Kutry. *Music:* John Debney. *Visual Effects:* Kevin Erham. *Written by:* David Chaskin. *Executive Producers:* Moshe Diamant, Ovidio G. Assonitis. *Produced by:* Ovidio G. Assonitis. *Directed by:* David Keith. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A meteorite crashes on the Hayes farm in Tennessee, run by a harsh fundamentalist named Nathan (Akins). The meteor begins to leak sludge into the farm’s well, infecting the crops, livestock and even the family with a terrible, deforming sickness. Nathan’s stepson Zachary (Wil Wheaton), the only one who begins to suspect how dangerous the water is, begins taking steps to avoid it, and shelter his sister, Alice (Amy) from it. But it is too late for his mother (Gregory), who is transformed into a snarling, deformed beast.

Nathan refuses to get help, believing that the disease is God’s

retribution for his wife's sin of adultery. Kindly Dr. Forbes (Huckabee) attempts to help the family, but his entreaties are rejected, and he is convinced by a scheming local politician, Davidson (Carlisle), not to tell anyone about the contaminated water, lest an important deal with the Tennessee Valley Commission go awry. But at the Hayes house, Zach's older brother Cyrus is becoming homicidal, and so is dear old dad.

COMMENTARY: The year 1984 was "the Year of the Farm" in Hollywood, with such critically acclaimed hits as *Places in the Heart*, *Country* and *The River*. It was only a matter of time, perhaps, before the horror genre responded with its own farm movie: *The Curse*, based (ever so loosely) on an H.P. Lovecraft tale, *The Colour Out of Space*. Whereas the aforementioned farm pictures starred talents including Sally Field, Jessica Lange and Sissy Spacek, *The Curse* can offer only John Schneider, Wil Wheaton and Claude Akins.

From a technical standpoint, *The Curse* is an absolutely atrocious movie. The meteor that crashes into the family farm, for instance, resembles nothing so much as a giant potato—a big, gleaming baked spud. Later, on the ground, it looks like a golf ball. And the miniature meant to represent the farm house at the film's finale is the kind of work you'd see representing Tokyo in a 1960s Toho film. In a key moment, Wil Wheaton approaches a window in the farmhouse to view the meteor and a cameraman is reflected in the glass. The shot lingers long enough, and his presence is so obvious, that you can actually make out the guy's features. And then there's the sort of "third stage" demon makeup in the film's finale, which just looks horrible, visible seams and all.

Making matters worse, the film's director, David Keith, is just as likely to make a stylistic error as vet an interesting scene. In one subterranean attack, for instance, Charlie (Steven Carlisle) runs into the mutated, rabid Frances (Gregory), and she kills him. This scene includes fast-motion photography, and as any student of film can attest, it's precisely the wrong technique here. Fast-motion photography inevitably makes a moment seem comical, not serious or scary, and so that's precisely how this attack comes off.

So why was *The Curse* a runaway hit (in low-budget movie terms) and how did it spawn a franchise? It isn't skillful, it isn't adroit, it doesn't even make that much sense, and yet, on the other hand, this film works on a stomach-churning, gut level. I would not be honest if I didn't note that this film sincerely and severely discomfited me. I felt sick after I watched it, and I didn't want to eat food (or drink milk) for

hours.

In its sickening and repulsive manner, *The Curse* reveals just how corruptible the food chain is. Get a little contaminated water into the soil, and soon it's affecting the cows and the chickens. It's in the garden affecting the tomatoes, and if you drink the tap water—watch out. This is an unsavory topic for a movie, no question about it, but I'm a firm believe that horror movies succeed when they broach taboos, when they force viewers to confront uncomfortable facets of life. And *The Curse* does that. It's effective in a very grisly way, as this family eats the contaminated food and becomes contaminated itself. It's not an exaggeration to say that this movie is an incredible viewing experience. Frances grows a tumor on her face, and it's unbearable to watch as it grows and spreads, and she demands that her children keep eating the sickening food (like an apple crop infested with worms).

One can't make the claim that *The Curse* is a well-made or technically skilled effort, but one can't deny that it's disgusting, and makes one think about food, and how susceptible it is to putrefaction and contamination. That the film speaks to the Zeitgeist of the time as another “farm” movie is an added bonus, as is the subtext about government corruption and the greed of a company that wants to buy the infected land.

By focusing on the idea of the nuclear American family succumbing to illness and insanity in the heartland, *The Curse* also ham-handedly deals with “don’t worry be happy/be afraid, be very afraid.” In this case, the Crane farm appears to be a place of God-fearing farmers who are healthy and robust by living off the land. Under the surface, however, the family is twisted by sickness, both mental (with Dad’s crazy, draconian, fundamentalist Christianity) and, of course, the physical in terms of the cysts, the tumors and other growths brought out from “inside” by the contaminated water.

Especially grotesque (and ironic) is the fact that Claude Akins—so effective here as the infected, insane Farm Daddy—served as the Beef Council spokesman throughout most of the 1990s ... after starring in this movie about infected cattle.

“Beef, it’s what’s for dinner...”

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn



Critical Reception

“[A] fabulously energetic horror comedy, one of the most entertaining genre works in years.”—Bruce Lanier Wright, *Nightwalkers: Gothic Horror Movies: The Modern Era*, Taylor Publishing Company, 1995, page 159.

“If you were after the scares of the original, this film probably didn’t live up to your expectations. But if you wanted a roller coaster ride in a horror film, this is among the best. Raimi and company pulled out all the stops in terms of broad comedy, swirling cameras and flying eyeballs, and left us with an ending that would have been even better if *Army of Darkness* had been released under its promised title of *Medieval Dead*. What’s here is a fun comedy on steroids, and Bruce Campbell loses any goofiness he had from the first film, becoming a Rambo-like confronter of Deadites, complete with catchphrases and every other excess you might expect from the era. A fun film, there’s no denying that, and the last real scares we would get in the series.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Campbell (Ash); Sarah Berry (Annie); Dan Hicks (Jake); Kassie Wesley (Bobbie Jo); Richard Domeier (Ed); Denise Bixler (Linda); John Peaks (Professor Knowby); Lou Hancock (Henrietta Knowby); Ted Raimi (Possessed Henrietta).

CREW: *Presented by:* Renaissance Pictures. *Music:* Joseph Lo Duca. *Special Makeup Effects:* Mark Shostrum. *Film Editor:* Kaye Davis. *Director of Photography:* Peter Deming. *Executive Producers:* Irwin Shapiro, Alex De Benedetti. *Producer:* Robert Tapert. *Written by:* Sam Raimi, Scott Spiegel. *Directed by:* Sam Raimi. *MPAA Rating:* Unrated. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ash (Campbell) and his girlfriend Linda (Bixler) drive up to a cabin in the Tennessee mountains where Ash discovers the Book of the Dead, a tome inscribed on human flesh and inked in human blood, and a tape recording left behind by a professor (Peaks). The professor warns that reciting the book’s demon resurrection passages will let loose a force that roams the forest and gives it license to possess the living. By playing the tape, Ash makes this come to pass. When Linda is possessed, he is forced to dismember her. Annie (Berry), the professor’s daughter, arrives, and after some misunderstandings, realizes that the evil can only be killed by opening

up a temporal vortex. But the vortex threatens to consume everything in the forest, including the cabin and Ash.

COMMENTARY: Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* saga re-boots in *Evil Dead 2*, taking the Lovecraftian saga back to square one, but this time infusing three critical new elements: a larger-than-life, Deadite-baiting hero in the re-invented Ash (again given flesh by The Great Chin, Bruce Campbell); a new and wacky sensibility of physical humor that reminds one of the Three Stooges; and finally, an overarching mythology that puts Ash's role as horror icon and demon killer into an historical context. Now an experienced movie director, Sam Raimi sweetens the pot further in this splendid re-do of the "cabin in the woods" siege by staging jaw-dropping, technologically complex set pieces which serve one essential purpose: torturing the long-suffering Campbell (the director's friend).

Don't call Ash "Ashley" here. His castrating sister Cheryl is gone, and his attitude has changed from wimpy victimization to avenging angel. Ash is a man of action, a doer, here. He chops up girlfriend Linda with much less self-examination than before, and even says a tender (and extremely humorous) "farewell to arms" to a misbehaving, demon-possessed hand. Ash also has some troops to rally this time around, and even a battle strategy: find those missing pages from the Book of the Dead. The hero is also gifted with his own personal Excalibur—a signature weapon—in this case, a chainsaw attached to his bloody stump.

Campbell himself reveals more of his charismatic personality than before. He seems personally energized by the material, and vets outrageous scenes of adept physical humor and even does a wicked Clint Eastwood imitation ("Groovy..."). Today, Ash and Campbell are both icons, and it isn't because of the original *Evil Dead*, it's because of this entertaining sequel, which transforms Ashley from meek man to god among men.

Every hero worth his salt must undergo a heroic journey, and Ash takes that trip in *Evil Dead 2*. The pages from the Necronomicon reveal his destiny as "the hero who fell from the sky" to vanquish Deadite evil, and the movie re-parses Ash as a hapless time-traveler, a man of multiple ages and epochs. This new, wider mythology grants *Evil Dead 2* a larger canvas on which to play, and also permits one of the best sting-in-the-tail/tale endings in horror history. In a long, slow pullback, Ash—perched atop an altar of sorts, between two pillars—is hailed by a gaggle of Middle Age knights as the great hero who kills the Deadite scum. As the camera retracts, the image becomes suddenly

familiar from the pages of the Necronomicon, and thus destiny is achieved. A quick black-out ends the movie on this ironic and brilliant note.

If Campbell has flowered in the role of the dim-witted Ash, *Evil Dead 2* succeeds because Raimi matches him at every turn with humor that's embedded in the very camerawork. In the brilliant final shot of *Evil Dead*, the "force" P.O.V. barreled down on hapless Ash and the film went black. When this sequel picks up that shot, it tweaks it. The camera rockets into Ash's face, the unseen force hoists him into the air, accelerates him across the air for miles, and spins him around again and again. Then the sequence culminates with a joke: Ash is dumped face first into a puddle, a horror movie pratfall. It's ridiculous, but timed so that it is hilarious.

Later, the sun's rays save Ash after he has been possessed. He sits in the woods in silence, and slowly, calmly, Raimi's camera pans, looking for signs of evil in the woods. The pan continues and continues, the audience fearful to see what it sees. But it's a joke—the camera eventually pans around so far that it has circumnavigated in a circle and lands right back where it began, focusing on clueless Ash. Again, Raimi employs a certain shot, one designed to convey information, to generate a laugh. The audience expects the pan to be of a revelatory nature, but it reveals nothing to us, or to Ash, and that makes audiences laugh.

Another horror sequence becomes funny when Ash gives evil the slip. Ash runs inside the cabin, that evil force booming and chasing behind him. He flees from room to room, twisting and turning down long corridors. Then Ash hides and the stymied force backs up out of the house as though those twisted corners never existed. Even evil forces, it seems, get confused and need directions. As with the long outdoor pan, the set-up is pure horror: a hand-held first person subjective shot bearing down on a lone, terrified victim. But the end result is a joke. The force has lost track of its quarry.

The special effects also play up humor. Deadite victims fly through the air like Superman, screaming bloody murder and bonking their heads right into trees, light bulbs or walls. Another funny scene follows a humorous Fred Astaire dance tribute, when Linda's decapitated head lands in Ash's lap. And just when it looks like the film might make a Lorena Bobbit joke six years before that event occurred, it does something even funnier: dramatizing Linda's ambulatory noggin biting right down on Ash's palm. The bloody thing won't let go, which means that Ash must bash the severed head into chairs, walls, doors,

even the camera, to release its grip. This is made doubly ridiculous by the fact that this is his beloved's skull he is smashing into everything.

The finest moment involves a flying eyeball. Raimi's approach is again to foster surprise and shock. Ash stomps on Henrietta, her eyeball pops out and takes a flight across the room, where, naturally, it is swallowed by a screaming damsel! Utterly ridiculous, but revelatory of Raimi's willingness to crank up the horror imagery by using standard shots of the genre, and then twisting them for comedic effect.

From little touches, like the legend appearing in the cabin that reads "Home Sweet Home," to the grand flourishes, like the scene in which Campbell wrestles himself and his evil hand to the kitchen floor, *Evil Dead 2* goes for broke. Fans tend to be divided about which *Evil Dead* film is best. The original was terrifying, an act of inspiration and an example of brilliance on a budget. Because of its humor and critic-pleasing reflexive approach, *Evil Dead 2* seems perhaps more indicative of Raimi, the artist. His compulsion to entertain is on display in every gonzo sequence, pushing the film ever deeper into surrealism and laughs. It's a sequel that's an equal, in an off-the-wall sort of way.

Fatal Attraction



Critical Reception

"[M]aybe *Fatal Attraction* is the kind of film where people take out of it what they bring to it..."—"Why Does *Fatal Attract*? Explanations, Like Reviews, Vary Widely." *Sacramento Bee*, November 17, 1987, page B5.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Douglas (Dan Gallagher); Glenn Close (Alex Forest); Anne Archer (Beth Gallagher); Fred Gwynne (Arthur); Mike Nussbaum (Bob); Stuart Pankin (Jimmy); Ellen Foley (Hildy); Meg Mundy (Joan); Tom Brennan (Howard).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a Jaffe/Lansing Production An Adrian Lyne Film. **Music:** Maurice Jarre. **Screenplay by:** James Dearden (from his original screenplay); **Produced by:** Stanley R. Jaffe, Sherry Lansing. **Casting:** Risa Bramon, Billy Hopkins. **Costume Design:** Ellen Mirojnick. **Film Editor:** Michael Kahn. **Production Designer:** Mel Bourne.

Director of Photography: Howard Atherton. *Art Director:* Jack Blackman.
Directed by: Adrian Lyne. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 120 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’m not going to be ignored, Dan.”—A not-very-veiled threat from the obsessed Alex Forest (Glenn Close) in Adrian Lyne’s essay on infidelity and consequence, *Fatal Attraction*.

SYNOPSIS: After meeting the sexy Alex Forrest (Close), married yuppie lawyer Dan Gallagher (Douglas) decides it’s time to play. While his wife Beth (Archer) and little girl are away in Connecticut with the in-laws, looking for a house away from the hustle and bustle of the city, Dan engages in a romantic, passionate weekend-long tryst with Alex. At the end of it, however, Alex has difficulty letting go and attempts suicide. Dan tends to her as long as he can, but must return to his life.

Soon, however, Alex is back in his life again. First telephoning incessantly. Then dropping by his office. She insists she’s in love with him, but Dan has no intention of abandoning his family. While Dan plans an exodus to the country, Alex retaliates with news that she’s expecting their child.

The situation escalates. Alex kidnaps Dan’s daughter (after killing the family pet, a rabbit), and then stages a full-out assault on the Gallagher home.

COMMENTARY: *Fatal Attraction* is *Jaws* for the 1980s. Only the great white shark is a jilted woman, played by Glenn Close. The finest, most brilliant movies can make the viewer adopt its world view, even if that world view is, on close inspection, rather shameful. That not inconsiderable feat is precisely the achievement of this high-intensity, knee-shaking precautionary tale from director Adrian Lyne.

Fatal Attraction opens with a long, quiet look at New York City by sunset. As focus shifts to a small apartment, the film charts the world of domesticity. Nickelodeon blares on the TV, the phone rings incessantly. The dog is where he shouldn’t be and the little one is trying on lipstick. Someone cries “Shit, shit, shit” and Dad can’t find his suit. For some, this world of domestic pandemonium is absolute bliss but for a hunter-gatherer? For a man who still wants to feel some excitement in his life?

Fatal Attraction tells the story of a man who isn’t quite ready to be domesticated, not even after years of marriage. Played by the wolfish Michael Douglas, Dan is a man who still fancies himself a player. He

resists moving out of the city to the country, and when his wife suggests a painting party at the new place, he practically blanches. “Painting parties? Beth, you’re making me nervous!” The point is that Dan is not yet ready to settle for the life of housebound patriarch, even though that house includes a beautiful wife (Archer’s luminous good looks are prominently displayed during a scene in which she applies makeup before a mirror). Her good looks are immaterial however; Dan still has an appetite to sate.

When Beth heads off to visit her parents, Dan decides it’s okay to play fast and loose with the rules of his marriage. After all, he’s a yuppie lawyer and in his job he’s rewarded for playing fast and loose with the law. So why shouldn’t the same apply to his personal life? Dan sees an opportunity in Alex and makes the most of it. His only fear: getting caught. Here *Fatal Attraction* makes an interesting comparison between wife and “other woman” in terms of a man’s appetite. At home, Beth has left behind frozen spaghetti in the fridge. At Alex’s house, she fixes him hot spaghetti. In other words, Beth represents leftovers, Alex is a culinary delight, and subtly *Fatal Attraction* makes clear that variety—a new dish—is precisely what Dan seeks.

After the affair, things turn sour, but again, Dan doesn’t feel guilty for having cheated on his wife, he feels worried because he might get caught. When Dan learns that Alex is pregnant he’s enraged, and yet during their weekend together, to the audience’s knowledge, Dan never even bothered to check if his partner was using birth control. He couldn’t be bothered to protect his family then, could he? And now he’s upset that Alex continues to pursue him.

There’s no doubt that Alex is deceitful. She indicates before the sexcapades with Dan that she understands the “terms” of their weekend. That’s a lie. Her suicide attempt indicates she’s a sick person, but even that doesn’t excuse her behavior. When she kills the rabbit and then abducts a child, it’s clear that she’s dangerous and her behavior is wrong. Yet *Fatal Attraction* almost totally renders Dan blameless for his involvement in the affair.



Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. A portrait of the deranged Alex (Glenn Close) in Adrian Lyne's morality tale about adultery, *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

The original ending, which saw Alex commit suicide and frame Dan for murder, would have rectified that. Instead, the bathroom siege that currently ends the movie is a bloody bit of work. A sick woman, and a pregnant woman to boot, is strangled, drowned and shot in the stomach ... and audiences cheered. Again, Alex is certainly every man's worst nightmare, but it's strange how much audiences hunger for her death. Like she alone is somehow responsible for threatening the sanctity of the American family when, as everyone understands, it takes two to tango.

Again, Alex is wrong and bad and scary, but *Fatal Attraction* builds up our feeling of intense hatred for her, so much so that the audience—this author included—thirsts for her blood. That world view is powerfully dramatized in the film, but it's really kind of sick. That a person with serious psychological problems should be depicted as though she's an inhuman slasher, like Jason or Michael. Watching *Fatal Attraction*, you get the feeling the end is rather despicable, that as bad and as nasty and as psychotic as Alex is, she still doesn't deserve the movie's sense of bloodlust and revenge.

Fatal Attraction ends on a close-up of a Gallagher family portrait in a small picture frame. The implication is that order has been restored and the family unit is back together, once again strong. Daddy has proven his worth to Mommy by killing the Other Woman. It's a sickening ending that doesn't burden Dan with his fair share of the blame. He went out looking for a "release" on that fateful weekend too, and he lied, covered it up, and jeopardized his family. He couldn't possibly have anticipated that Alex would be the nutcase of the century, but he still might have spared one thought—one thought—about the woman with whom he was intimate. *Fatal Attraction* lets Dan off the hook, and more so, makes him the hero of the day "rescuing" his family from the evil psychotic bitch! This is roughly analogous to starting a fire and then, after flames have consumed half of your house, putting it out while simultaneously asking to be honored as a fireman.

Flowers in the Attic

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Victoria Tennant (Corrine); Kristy Swanson (Kathy); Jeb Stuart Adams (Christopher); Ben Ganger (Cory); Lindsay Parker (Carrie);

Louise Fletcher (Grandmother); Marshall Colt (Father); Nathan Davis (Grandfather); Brooke Fries (Flower Girl); Alex Koba (John Hall); Leonard Mann (Bart Winslow); Bruce Neckels (Minister); Gus Peters (Caretaker); Clare C. Peck (Narrator).

CREW: New World Pictures and Fries Entertainment Present a Charles Fries Production. *Casting:* Penny Perry. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Film Editor:* Tom Fries. *Production Designer:* John Muto. *Directors of Photography:* Frank Byers, Gil Hubbs. *Executive Producers:* Charles Fries, Mike Rosenfeld. *Based on the novel by:* V.C. Andrews. *Screenplay by:* Jeffrey Bloom. *Produced by:* Sy Levin, Tom Fries. *Directed by:* Jeffrey Bloom. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You—the children—are the Devil’s spawn.”—Grandma gets ugly in *Flowers in the Attic*.

SYNOPSIS: After their father (Colt) is killed in a car accident, four children (Swanson, Adams, Ganger and Parker) and their mother Corinne (Tennant) are forced to seek help at Foxworth Hall, the very home that Corinne left seventeen years earlier.

The vast mansion is ruled by Corinne’s nasty mother (Fletcher) and dying father (Davis), and the children are forced to remain locked in one bedroom (and then an attic) while the mother grovels for forgiveness in hopes of being allowed back in the family will. The months pass and the children learn that they are being slowly poisoned. Worse, they come to a reckoning about their mother and her future plans.

COMMENTARY: V.C. Andrews’ novel *Flowers in the Attic* (and its sequels, including *Petals on the Wind*) are Gothic romances, beloved by a generation of teenage girls, which feature hot scenes of incestuous sex between brother and sister. These characters, Kathy and Christopher, are young, they’re trapped in an attic, they feel the pangs of adolescence ... and one thing leads to another. It’s *The Blue Lagoon* in a Gothic tower.

The movie version is a total letdown, an utter whitewashing of the book’s subject matter. The movie never depicts any sex involving the characters played by Kristy Swanson and Jeb Stuart Adams, and never even indicates that there is sex between the characters.

Call me a pervert all you like, but why produce a movie of popular—nay, bestselling—pulp material like this and then leave out the one element that fans expected? I understand that these kids are underage,

but I'm not the one who wrote the story, and I want to see it as written.

If the filmmakers didn't have the courage of their convictions to tell Andrews' story, perhaps they shouldn't have adapted the novel into a movie in the first place. This is like producing a movie of *Oedipus* but not including the plot point that the king sleeps with his mother.

Flowers in the Attic is an unappealing, disappointing movie anyway. The premise, put to celluloid, simply doesn't hold water.

The audience is supposed to believe that after her husband dies, Corinne has absolutely no choice but to return home and live with her evil, Fundamentalist mother, who demands that her children stay in the attic? So Corinne can't get a job waiting tables? Or working the cash register at the local Sears? Christopher and Kathy are both old enough to work too, so was McDonald's not hiring that week? Christopher is smart (he's studying to be a doctor, in fact); wouldn't this option at least cross his mind? And, isn't it just a bit hard to believe that Corinne and her husband, understanding how awful her parents are, wouldn't have planned for a disaster such as the one Corinne faces. Ever heard of a life insurance policy?

The idea of staging a modern Gothic in the American cinema is a good one, and the setting of the imposing mansion is always powerful (think *The Haunting* or *The Spiral Staircase*). But *Flowers in the Attic* is lethargically paced, and its characters keep making stupid decisions so they will have to remain trapped. The film's big finish, Kathy shouting "Mother!" and joining the other children as they walk out of the mansion unimpeded, is also anticlimactic. Her mother ends up hanged on her wedding day, but so many questions are left unanswered. If she was the one putting the rat poison on the kid's donuts, why did she stop feeding them? If the grandmother, played by Louise Fletcher, wasn't really the culprit, then why did she stop bringing the children food? Why did she let there be four graves dug outside when one boy died, if she didn't plan on killing all the kids?

Even though *Flowers in the Attic* charts terrain powerful in the 1980s, particularly the notion that underneath the surface of a "normal" family dwells sickness, perversion and murder, the film doesn't manage to make a point about society at large. The film's one redeeming factor is Louise Fletcher, as the Scripture-quoting grandmother.

In her first appearance in the film, the camera captures her clutching a

Bible rigidly in one hand. She is dressed immaculately in black, with perfectly coiffed hair. There is a coldness and severity about her that is terrifying. And as she proved on *Deep Space Nine* as Kai Winn, Fletcher has absolutely mastered speaking condescending, cruel dialogue in a sweet sing-song. Frankly, Fletcher—armed and dangerous with a pair of oversized scissors—sells the “fear” factor in *Flowers in the Attic* better than the silly plot.

The Gate



Critical Reception

“Behind the rather routine horror-film scaffolding of *The Gate* lies a charming fantasy-fable about love. [The writer and director] have made a sincere attempt to say something shamelessly positive to and about young people and their relationships with another and their parents.”—Gordon Walter, *Magill’s Cinema Annual 1988*, Salem Press, 1988, page 147.

“This is a good-natured terror, the sort that can take time at the height of action for a quick joke ... This is a terror with a moral ... And this is terror with a heart.”—Johanna Steinmetz, “Terror Swings with Humor in *The Gate*,” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 1987, Section V, page 3.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stephen Dorff (Glen); Louis Tripp (Terry); Christa Denton (Al); Kelly Rowan (Lori Lee); Jennifer Irwin (Linda Lee); Deborah Grover (Mom); Scott Denton (Dad); Ingrid Veninger (Paula); Sean Fagan (Eric); Linda Goranson (Terry’s Mom).

CREW: New Century Entertainment Corporation Present in Association with Vista Organization Ltd. an Alliance Entertainment/John Kemeny Production. *Casting:* Mary Gail Artz, Clare Walker. *Director of Photography:* Thomas Vamos. *Production Design:* William Beeton. *Film Editor:* Rit Wallis. *Special Visual Effects Design and Supervision:* Randall William Cook. *Special Makeup:* Craig Reardon. *Matte Photography:* Bill Taylor. *Music:* Michael Hoenig, J. Peter Robinson. *Co-Producer:* Andras Hamori. *Written by:* Michael Nankin. *Produced by:* John Kemeny. *Directed by:* Tibor Takacs. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the backyard of a suburban house, two pre-adolescent

boys, Glen (Dorff) and Terry (Tripp), dig a deep hole after a construction crew unearths a strange geode nearby. Glen's parents leave for three days, putting his big sister, Al (Denton) in charge, and ordering that Glen fill up the hole. With the grown-ups gone, Al throws a party at the house—one in which Glen mysteriously levitates during a trick—and Terry realizes (by reading the liner notes of a Satanic rock band's album) that they have all inadvertently opened a gate to a demon realm. Behind the gate, monstrous demons await, ready to take back a world that they believe is rightfully theirs.

COMMENTARY: The 1980s saw a new facet in the development of the American nuclear family, the ascent of the “latchkey kid.” Named so because the child kept his/her own set of keys to the family house, the latchkey kid was a school-age child arriving home every afternoon to an empty, unsupervised house. There were more latchkey kids in the 1980s than in previous decades because of the uptick in one-parent households, and because of increased incidence of two-income families.

These independently minded children used TV (and eventually, video rentals) as daily babysitters, and existed in a world seemingly independent from adult contact ... alone for as many as three hours a day. The proliferation of inexpensive microwave ovens also meant that children could prepare their own meals with a minimum of difficulty, a fact that removed the “family dinner hour” from the family equation forever. This is troubling, because as President Reagan noted, “All great changes in America begin at the dinner table.” So what do you do when nobody’s seated at that table any more? Where does change come from then? Anyway, in regards to the latchkey phenomenon, some estimates indicate that as many as one-third of the children who were of school age in the 1980s were, at one time or another, latchkey children.

Serving as a mirror to the time in which they are crafted, horror films of the 1980s often focus on this world of latchkey kids. It wasn’t always a safe world, but rather one where latchkey kids fight evil under their own auspices and without aid from the adult world (which is consumed, usually, with making money). Latchkey kid protagonists appear in *Invaders from Mars* (1986), *The Monster Squad* (1987) and the low-budget effort, *The Gate*. In all these films, the children are depicted as highly resourceful, spirited heroes, but ones who are facing terrible—even evil—things, a reflection, perhaps, of parental fear that the children at home aren’t protected from outside influences (like television). In *The Gate* in particular, the “home alone” kids face a pretty monstrous evil, a world of demons pooling up from a hole in

the backyard.

Although Glen (Dorff) is *The Gate*'s ostensible protagonist, the phenomenon of the latchkey is seen more prominently in the character of Terry, played by Louis Tripp. Terry returns to his house at one point to find that his dad—away on business—has left cold pizza for him on the kitchen table. And what does Terry do, without supervision? He spends time listening to Satanic rock 'n' roll (from the likes of a band named Sacrifyx) alone in his bedroom. This influence is in fact the very thing that allows Terry to understand the nature of the enemy growing next door. So, in a sense, the movie makes a case for a child's self-discovery and exploration as a positive thing. The music of Sacrifyx may be dark and filled with death, and not at all like his father's rock 'n' roll, but it nonetheless plays an important role in Terry's fashioning of his identity, and—in a sense—it saves his life.

What would buoy worried parents is that down to the last one, the children in this film are depicted as resourceful, decent and loving. Although there's sibling rivalry aplenty, as well as teenage put-downs, the evil demons are defeated through Glen's transcendent love for his older sister, Al. To destroy the Beast, Glen utilizes the rocket he was planning to give to her ... an act of kindness. So there's actually a "family values" message at the heart of *The Gate*, for those willing to give it a chance.

Stylistically, *The Gate* adopts many of the techniques utilized so successfully in Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead*. Characters, including kids, are transformed into glazed-eyed demons at the drop of the hat, and the evil ones are depicted in wild zooms and in bouts of stop-motion animation. Although the film is rated PG-13, *The Gate* doesn't skimp on the horror aspect, and so eye sockets are blown up and perforated, and there's a fair amount of gore. In one impressive special effects moment, a demon falls to the floor and splits into a group of little humunculi ... creepy critters that recall the 1973 TV-movie, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*. It's ambitiously produced and pretty effectively handled, especially for what some might dismiss as a kiddie horror movie.

The message of *The Gate*: When the parents are away, don't open to the door to Hell. But if you do, be sure to tell your older sister.

Ghoulies 2

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Damon Martin (Larry); Royal Dano (Uncle Ned); Phil Fondacaro (Sig Nigel); J. Downing (P. Hardin); Kerry Remsen (Nicole); Dale Wyatt (Dixie); Jon Maynard Pennell (Bobby); Sasha Jenson (Teddy); Star Andreef (Alice); William Butler (Merle); Donnie Jeffcoat (Eddie); Christopher Burton (Leo); Mickey Knox (Ray); Ramono Puppo (Zampano); Ames Morton (Patty).

CREW: Empire Productions Presents a Charles Band Production. *Casting Director:* Anthony Barnao. *Ghoulies Created by:* John Buechler and MMI, Inc. *Production Design:* Giovanni Natalucci. *Associate Producer:* Frank Hildbrand. *Music Supervisor:* Jonathan Scott Bogner. *Music composed and performed by:* Fuzzbee Morse. *Film Editor:* Barry Zetlin. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Roberto Bessi. *Director of Photography:* Sergio Salvati. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Story by:* Charlie Dolan. *Screenplay by:* Dennis Paoli. *Produced and Directed by:* Albert Band. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A number of devilish little ghoulies stow away on a truck for a carnival attraction labeled “Satan’s Den” and proceed to run amok at the fair once the carnival is set up. Just as dangerous to the survival of the carnival is Mr. Hardin (J. Downing), an accountant (performing an audit for the carnival’s owners) who is determined to shut it down. This means that Larry (Martin) and his Uncle Ned (Dano) must find ways to liven up Satan’s Den, a haunted house-type attraction. When the evil Ghoulies take up residence there, carnival-goers start streaming into Satan’s Den to see the murderous little beasts, whom they think are merely elaborate special effects. But then things get really nasty, and the Ghoulies run out onto the fairground and begin wreaking even more havoc.

COMMENTARY: In 1984, audiences roared with laughter when Joe Dante’s mischievous Gremlins ran riot in an American town, whirled on ceiling fans, sang to the tunes of *Snow White*, flashed one another, break-danced and in general had a lot of nasty fun. They were tiny creatures imitating bad human behavior, and, I suppose, that was why so many audiences were amused by their antics. At least in *Gremlins*, there was an understanding that the three rules of the Gremlin life had been broken, and that’s why they were misbehaving. In humans, the answer isn’t always so clear; we don’t have such rules. We just misbehave.

Many 1980s filmmakers saw the impact of *Gremlins* and set about creating mischievous little cinematic monsters of their own. Their

movies had titles like *Troll*, *Hobgoblins* and *Ghoulies*. Of the latter, it can be fairly stated that *Ghoulies* was a modestly entertaining time-waster, if no more. So one has to wonder why filmmakers would embark on *Ghoulies 2*, truly one of the most unnecessary sequels since *Boogeyman II* or *Silent Night Deadly Night 2*.

But you can understand why the film was made if you just watch one short segment from near the finale. After the *Ghoulies* break loose on the carnival fairground, one pops up in a toilet—the trademark image of the first film. Another gets behind a toy gun attraction-shooting gallery and begins firing at passersby. A nasty one gets into the dunking booth pool and (to the briefly heard strains of John Williams' *Jaws* theme) eats the arm off a soaked clown. It's the *Gremlins* principle of bad behavior. Maybe its wish-fulfillment; maybe the *Ghoulies* are doing things that amuse us or we wish we could do, because—after all—who doesn't hate clowns?

The filmmakers seem aware of this. Much of the middle of the film is consumed with a debate about ghoulish (or Ghoulie-ish) entertainment, and what people take for real. The *Ghoulies* have taken up residence in a “haunted house,” and are actually killing guests, but other guests believe it's all just great stagecraft. “This place is better than Epcot center!” one kid enthuses. Another guest, a know-it-all, suggests that everything “must be remote controlled.” Eventually, the *Ghoulies* are actually applauded for their murderous misdeeds, and take a bow before a live audience.

The point? Perhaps just that audiences appreciate good gory effects, and that in the 1980s, they'd become so realistic that we couldn't distinguish special effects from the real thing any more. That's a worthy and interesting message, but it would be seriously wrong-headed to indicate that *Ghoulies 2* treats this theme as anything but a *leitmotif* on which to hang a few good jokes. The film is not a rich satire, brimming with intelligence. My evidence? One of the first scenes involves a man on the run. He hides in an auto shop and finds there, prominently placed, a convenient barrel of something labeled EXTREMELY TOXIC SOLVENT. He drops a bag of *Ghoulies* in it, and then is pushed in himself. But the point is that any movie that features such a ridiculous contrivance isn't exactly striving for subtlety or social messages.

On the contrary, the film follows the *Friday the 13th*-spawned tradition in which most of the intended victims (teenagers) are thoroughly unlikable, and thus moviegoers can “enjoy” when they get killed. Here, Sasha Jenson of *Halloween IV* is one of those unlikable

fellas, as is William Butler, and to the film's detriment, we don't even meet them before they enter Satan's Den and encounter the Ghoulies. In other words, the victims are random, not "organic" characters in the plot. We have nothing invested in them, so our only interest is in how they meet their demise.

The Ghoulies themselves aren't dynamic enough to be the center of the film, either. They aren't quite as rubbery-looking as in the first film, and the main ones (a green baby-like thing, a rat-like monster, a furry cat monster, and a bat) are a little bit evolved. A little bit. They're still not convincing, even though one character in the film pays them the ultimate compliment by saying that "they look real." That may be the funniest line in the picture.

Perhaps what remains most interesting about *Ghoulies 2* is that its main antagonist, Phillip Hardin, is a yuppie accountant. For a decade spawning yuppies in such dangerous numbers, horror movies sure hated 'em. There's Paul Reiser's character in *Aliens* (1986), smug Michael Douglas getting his comeuppance in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and the like. Here, the accountant wants a complete audit of the carnival and may demand lay-offs if he isn't satisfied with the bottom line. "This carnival is a business. It'll be run like a business," he declares. "A company runs on profit!" he suggests at another. These are all buzz words from the 1980s, when people were demanding—among other things—that governments and public schools be run like businesses. Just hopefully not ones in the mold of Enron or Worldcom.

In time-honored fashion, this anti-hero is dispatched when he sits on a toilet to take a dump, and a Ghoulie waiting there bites him on the ass. This may be a metaphor about corporate corruption, or just another stupid moment in a really bad movie.

The *Ghoulies* saga would continue with *Ghoulies Go to College* (1993) and *Ghoulies IV* (1994), but that's a story for another book.

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night 2

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Ironside (Bill Nordham); Wendy Lyon (Vicki Carpenter); Justin Louis (Craig Nordham); Richard Monette (Father Cooper); Lisa Schrage (Mary Lou Maloney); Terri Hawkes (Kelly Hennenlotter); Beverley Hendry (Monica Waters); Brock Simpson

(Josh); Beth Gondek (Jess Browning); Wendell Smith (Walt Carpenter); Steve Atkinson (Young Billy Nordham); Dennis Robinson (Mr. Craven); Michael Evans (Matthew Dante).

CREW: A Peter Simpson Production. *Casting*: Lucinda Sill. *Production Manager*: Robert Wertheimer. *Associate Producer*: Ilana Frank. *Director of Photography*: John Herzon. *Additional Photography*: Brenton Spencer. *Art Director*: Sandy Kybartas. *Musical Score*: Paul Zaza. *Film Editor*: Nick Rotundo. *Executive Producers*: Peter Simpson, Peter Haley. *Co-Producer*: Ray Sager. *Screenplay by*: Ron Oliver. *Producer*: Peter Simpson. *Directed by*: Bruce Pittman. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At the senior prom of 1957, Mary Lou Maloney (Schrage) jilts her date Bill Nordham for another boy, and Billy engineers a prank that goes wrong. He drops a stink bomb on Mary Lou while she is on stage to receive her crown as prom queen, but the bomb lights her dress, and she burns to death. Thirty years later, Bill Nordham (Ironside) is the school principal, and the boy who tried to steal Mary Lou away is Father Cooper (Monette), the town priest. The senior prom is approaching and Nordham's son Craig (Louis) is dating the lovely Vicki Carpenter (Lyon).

Vicki discovers Mary Lou's trunk in the school prop room and takes the dead girl's tiara and purple shawl. This is just the excuse Mary Lou needs to return from the grave to start murdering young students, including Vicki's friend, Jess (Gondek). Before long, Mary Lou has also possessed Vicki, forcing her to commit murder (like crushing a school buddy in a locker) and to try to seduce her own father (Smith). After Father Cooper is slain by Mary Lou, Mr. Nordham realizes that his son's life is at stake and sets out to stop his vengeful, ghostly ex-girlfriend. But it's too late, for the senior prom is here, and this time Mary Lou is determined to reign as prom queen.

COMMENTARY: In the annals of unnecessary sequels, *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* rates high. Contrarily, in the ranks of 1980s horror movies, it's merely a mediocre effort.

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II advances a common trend from its era. During the mid-to late 1980s, many lower-rung franchises followed a theatrical surprise hit of the non-fantasy slasher paradigm mold (*Prom Night*, *Sleepaway Camp*, *Slumber Party Massacre*, *Silent Night, Deadly Night*) with a more fanciful—and also more cheaply produced—rubber reality sequel. In most cases, these less-than-stellar sequels went right to video, where the “brand name” and sequel appellation would

guarantee a built-in audience. *Caveat emptor.*

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II combines the aesthetic of *Prom Night* and *Carrie* (1976) and ends up a mishmash. An event in the past (at a prom in 1957) triggers horrific events in the present; Mary Lou wields supernatural powers rather than a butcher knife or other everyday implements to wreak her vengeance.

Whereas the slasher movie paradigm boasts a wide set of rules that have been enumerated in this book, the problem with rubber reality movies is that—unless the director is very careful (as Wes Craven is careful) there are not enough rules. The powers of villains, even their origins and nature, are not defined at all. This means that anything can happen, and often will. The result of such ill-defined antagonists and abilities is that the viewer feels he or she is being toyed with. That's certainly the case in this film.

In this instance, the rubber reality template allows characters to pass between worlds or dimensions at the drop of a hat, or the whim of a screenwriter. A mirror thus becomes the watery portal to the demonic realm, and an evil hand stretches out from it. A volleyball strikes the film's heroine, Vicki, in the head and suddenly she's back in the school gym in 1957 and the volleyball net consists of giant cobwebs. So Mary Lou can travel through time and bridge dimensions, but she's not powerful to go after the guy she really wants, Michael Ironside's principal, straight out?

These rubber reality transitions are competently forged, but hardly on a par with the best of this subgenre, which would include the *Elm Street* films and even *Shocker* (1989). In fact, *Hello Mary Lou* has the audacity to rip off for its conclusion the end of the original *Elm Street*. Only here Mary Lou is driving the evil car, not Freddy.

While watching *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II*, one may also come to suspect that the producers really wanted to amp up the exploitation aspects of this material to make it more appealing to a wider audience. There's full frontal nudity in a shower scene, focusing on both Vicki and her friend. And when Mary Lou stalks the friend through the locker room, Vicki's bud is still totally nude. Later, a computer geek takes a blow job as his payment for services rendered (but he pays the piper for his vice when Mary Lou electrocutes him). This is all fairly graphic for a routine horror movie.

Probably the worst aspect of *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* is the fact—as *Hellraiser*'s Uncle Frank might remind us—that the movie promises

but never delivers. There's a brilliant set-up halfway through the film that seems to promise a gruesome death in the high school art room. The camera lingers on a paper cutter as the weapon of choice, but then the movie switches gears abruptly and offers only a garden variety hanging. I don't know about anybody else, but I wanted to see some paper cutter carnage.

Goodbye Mary Lou, goodbye.

Hellraiser



Critical Reception

"I'll admit it—I never got the joke about this film. It's a little bit S&M, a little bit British modern gothic, and a tiny bit slasher (at least some of its mean-spiritedness), and it represents the first attempt anyone had really taken to create a universe in a horror story since Lovecraft, but it just didn't work as a whole, and the fact that it has spawned so many sequels boggles the mind. Clive Barker would do some interesting things with *Night Breed* later in his career, but *Hellraiser* always felt like horror critics were just dying to heap praise on somebody, so picked this because it was fuzzy enough to seem of merit."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

"In 1986, Stephen King famously said 'I have seen the future of horror, and his name is Clive Barker.' While Barker's early writings were much darker than King's, they were more traditional for the genre. With his novel *The Hellbound Heart* (the basis of the film *Hellraiser*), Barker re-imagines Greek tragedy, reveling in the disintegration of a family cursed by adultery and murder. The author's most famous creations, the Cenobites, serve as a Dionysian chorus. Onscreen, Barker's nightmare bristles with frenetic energy, owing to the author-director's splatterpunk aesthetic—he overstimulates us with horrific images, and makes his monsters seem all the more horrible by showing us how bored they are with it all. Equally compelling is the strange chemistry between Ashley Laurence's angel and Doug Bradley's devil. At a time when horror movies were becoming increasingly tongue-in-cheek, Barker's *fin de siecle* monster movies were cutting edge."—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

"A gory yet haunting movie. Clive Barker was able to move his imagination from the page to the screen without blurring his distinct vision."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Andrew Robinson (Larry); Clare Higgins (Julia); Sean Chapman (Frank); Robert Hines (Steve); Ashley Laurence (Kirsty); Oliver Smith (Frank the Monster); Antony Allen (First Victim); Leon Davis (Second Victim); Michael Cassidy (Third Victim); Frank Baker (Derelict); Kenneth Nelson (Bill); Niall Buggy (Dinner Guest); Dan Atkins, Oliver Parker (Moving Men); Pamela Sholton (Complaining Customer); Doug Bradley (Lead Cenobite); Nicholas Vance (Chattering Cenobite); Simon Bamford (Butterball Cenobite); Grace Kirby (Female Cenobite); Sharon Bower (Nurse); Raul Newney (Doctor).

CREW: A Clive Barker film. *Special Makeup Effects Design:* Bob Keen. *Production Designer:* Mike Buchanan. *Director of Photography:* Robin Vidgeon. *Film Editor:* Richard Marden. *Music Composed by:* Christopher Young. *Associate Producer:* Selwyn Roberts. *Executive Producers:* David Saunders, Christopher Webster, Mark Armstrong. *Producer:* Christopher Figg. *Casting Director:* Sheila Trezise. *Special Makeup Effects Workshop Supervisor:* Geoff Portass. *Cenobite Costume Designer:* Jane Wildgoose. *Stunt Arranger:* Jim Dowdall. *Written and Directed by:* Clive Barker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Frank Cotton (Chapman), a sadist and masochist, finds a quiet spot in his attic to open the Lament Configuration puzzle box in hopes of discovering a gateway to new pleasures, but only opens the door to hellish pain when his summons brings four terrifying cenobites, Pinhead (Bradley), Chatterer (Vance), Butterball (Bamford) and a female (Kirby). They rip him to pieces with chains and leave him for dead. Some time later, Frank's brother Larry (Robinson) and Larry's frigid wife Julia (Higgins) move into the family house, and Larry's blood accidentally is spilled in the attic. The blood revives Frank, but only as a skeletal, miserable creature. He needs human blood if he is to return to normal, and so he enlists Julia, his former lover and a woman who is obsessed with him, to bring it to him.

Julia lures sex-starved men she meets in bars to the Cotton attic and bludgeons them to death so Frank can feed on their corpses, drink their blood, and grow a new skin. Larry's daughter Kirsty (Laurence) walks in on this atrocity one day and learns the truth. She clumsily uses the lament configuration puzzle, summoning the Cenobites once more. They want to torture her in Hell for all eternity, but she

proposes a bargain. If she is spared, she will lead them right to Frank, a man who has eluded them. The Cenobites agree to Kirsty's terms, but aren't ones for keeping bargains. Kirsty finds this out the hard way when she returns home to find that Frank has "put on" her father's skin, and that the Cenobites still want to take her back to Hell.

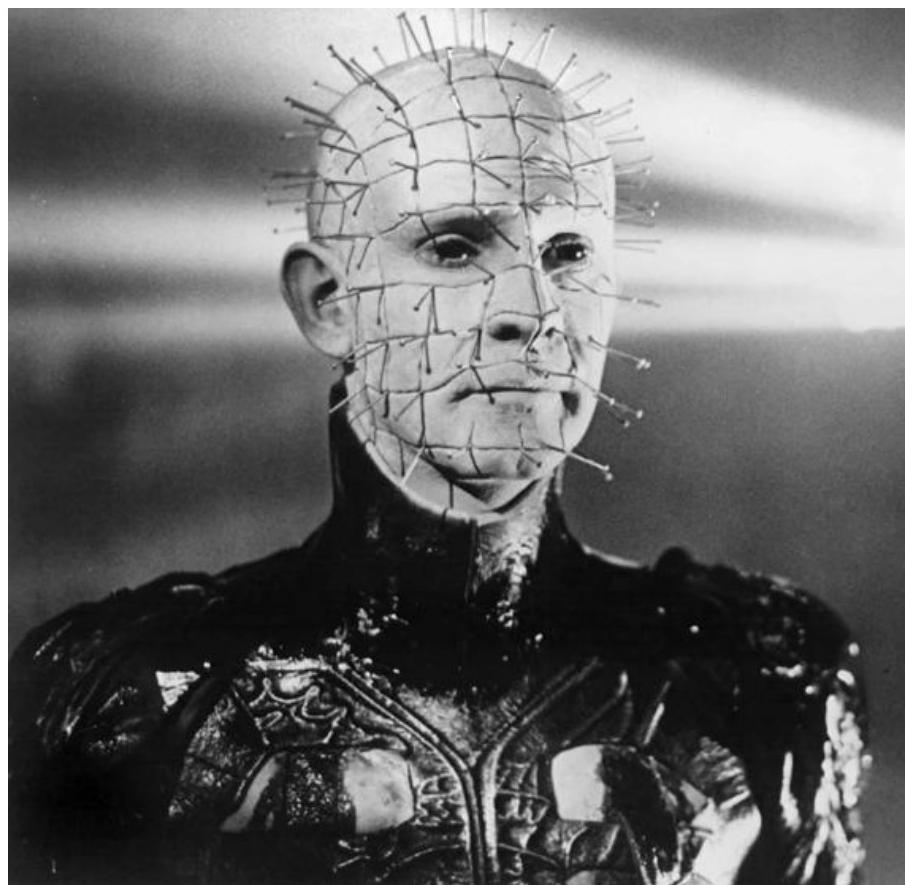
COMMENTARY: "What's your pleasure, sir?" asks a peddler at a Middle Eastern bazaar. This is the question that frames and book-ends *Hellraiser*, a deeply frightening film about obsessive lust and pleasure, and the lengths that humans will go to sate their needs. It's ironic that often times, horror movie franchises begin unexpectedly, with films that don't seem designed to serve in that capacity, and *Hellraiser* is one of those movies. Later films in the series shift focus to more mainstream ideas, to the inhuman and monstrous, leather-clad Cenobites but here, in Clive Barker's stunning directorial debut, the focus is squarely on the human, and on human foibles.

"Some things have to be endured and that's what makes the pleasures so sweet," the hedonistic Uncle Frank tells Kirsty, and this is *Hellraiser*'s thesis. Although Ashley Laurence is at center stage as innocent young Kirsty, the most compelling character is Julia, played by Clare Higgins. She is a frigid married woman who is unable to experience sexual pleasure with her milque toast husband, Larry (Andrew Robinson), and, what's more, made him a cuckold from Day One of their marriage. Julia basks in the memory of a one-time sexual dalliance with Larry's brother, Frank (Chapman), a loner and explorer in the realms of pain and pleasure. Although Larry promises the ice princess Julia that they can be happy upon moving into Frank's house, she immediately dwells (in flashback) on the pleasure that Frank gave her when they made love. Part of the thrill, the movie tells us, is that Frank was aggressive and in control. He made love to her, in fact, right on her neatly pressed wedding dress...

It is Julia's obsessive, uncontrollable desire for Frank (and for sexual pleasure) that triggers many of the events in *Hellraiser*, and Clive Barker utilizes the technique of fast cross-cutting to demonstrate how. While Julia stands in the attic, remembering how Frank made love to her with such passion, the film cross-cuts to Larry downstairs lifting a mattress up the stairs with movers. The frenzied motion of Frank making love to Julia becomes entangled with the back-and-forth of Larry's hand dragging the corner of the mattress up and up. Then, as Julia attains orgasm, Larry's hand scrapes over a rusted nail. Blood fountains out of his hand (an ejaculation of bodily fluid that tellingly is timed to match Frank's), and he goes up to see his wife. His blood splattering on the attic floor is what brings Frank back to life, and one

senses from the *mise-en-scene* that it is Julia's desire for Larry's brother that has made this happen. Her husband's spilled blood, the "wound" inflicted upon Larry, is the very thing that returns Julia's lover to her.

Frank is revived by Larry's blood, but needs more of it. To attain it, he promises to be with Julia again, sexually. This promise is more than she can stand and Julia starts bringing back unsuspecting men to the attic to feed to her one-time lover. "Every drop of blood you spill puts more flesh on my bones ... and we both want that, don't we?" he tantalizes. Julia does. The film's first murder sequence finds this restrained-seeming woman bludgeoning a man with a hammer. There is nothing light or easy or jokey about this sequence; it is bloody, brutal and utterly shocking.



He'll tear your soul apart. Pinhead (Doug Bradley) arrives on the scene in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*.

As Frank desperately tries to achieve a state where he once again can experience pleasure and sensation, the killing becomes easier for Julia. She is soon a pro at it, seeing only the end: a new tryst with Frank, a man who can get her off, in part because he isn't "poor Larry, as obedient as ever." The film indicates that Julia's sexual pleasure derives from being dominated, and Frank manipulates this secret fantasy of being "taken." By contrast, Larry is subtly suggested to be a lousy lay, someone with whom the seed of passion finds no fallow ground. "Don't mourn him," Frank suggests, "He was dead long before we ever touched him." Thus Frank clearly defines his life by the pleasure—and pain—he feels, and Julia is the same way. She even begins to accept Frank's disgusting feeding habits and they are, like much in *Hellraiser*, nauseating on a level comparable with the finale of *The Fly*. This is a squishy, wet movie, and one that makes viewers understand that humans are really just bags of liquid that can be punctured, ripped, and deformed.

Hellraiser obsesses on the ways desire can become a thing obscene ... how the need to feel and experience pleasure can drive one to do monstrous things. Sex is just a means to an end, and that's where the Cenobites enter the picture. They're explorers in the realm of sensation, "in the further realms of experience," and their experience and appetites make a mockery of Julia and Frank's petty human desires. "Demons to some, angels to others," they rend flesh, rip out organs and tear souls apart ... all, one senses, in the pursuit of pleasure. Doesn't sound pleasurable to you? Well, recall that Frank has said that certain things (apparently like dismemberment) must be endured so the pleasure is sweeter. After first making love to Julia, Frank noted that orgasm was "never enough," indicating why he went in search of the Lament Configuration, the puzzle box that would attract the Cenobites. Life's pleasures had become meaningless to him, and so he needed to explore other realms, other dimensions.

Flesh is important in *Hellraiser*. It's the human bridge to the outside world, the part of our bodies that experiences everything. It is a restoration of flesh that Frank seeks. It is flesh that the Cenobites wish to experience, and it is the sensations—and limitations—of the flesh that begin Frank's odyssey into the further realms. At the end of the film, when he proclaims, "Jesus wept," it is in mockery of Christ on the cross. Christ died carrying the sins of others. But the desires of the flesh have turned Christ's flock, men like Frank and women like Julia, inward, away from ideals like "love thy neighbor." Instead, they wield hammers and suck blood and commit trespasses against God's law in the name of nothing more than hedonism.

So everything in *Hellraiser* comes back to that question that opens and closes the film: “What’s your pleasure, sir?” The Cenobites, Julia and Frank all care only about finding out. Kirsty—an innocent—wanders into this perverse scenario and is the film’s clever final girl, but ultimately she’s just a bystander in a play about passion, and the addictive quality of pleasure—the ever-escalating need to top previous ones. In looking at this perverse quality of human nature, Clive Barker fashions a dark, brooding, bloody horror film. It’s really the only *Hellraiser* film that legitimately concerns human nature and uses its supernatural ingredients (including Cenobites, the Box, and the homeless bum) to tell audiences something about humanity. In comparison to this serious, uncompromising vision, the other *Hellraiser* films, while proving diverting journeys into the cinematic realms of rubber reality and iconic boogeyman, are revealed to be nothing more but playtime with Pinhead.

The Hidden

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Kyle MacLachlan, the best thing about this movie, moves through it with a (literally) alien remove and an air that he knows a helluva lot more than you do, as if this were a training exercise for *Twin Peaks*, which, I suppose, it was. But I don’t mean to imply that the rest of the film isn’t pretty darn good, too. There aren’t too many SF movies that are about law enforcement on any level deeper than ‘guys with guns and badges run around,’ and this one manages to overlay a poignancy to being a cop that is, I guess, universal.”—MaryAnn Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kyle MacLachlan (Lloyd Gallagher); Michael Nouri (Tom Beck); Claudia Christian (Brenda Lee Van Buren); Clarence Felder (Lt. John Masterson); Clu Gulager (Lt. Ed Flynn); Ed O’Ross (Chief Willis); William Boyett (Jonathan Miller); Richard Brooks (Sanchez); Katerine Cannon (Barbara Beck); Larry Cedar (Brem); John McCann (Senator Holt); Chris Mulkey (Jack De Vries); Lin Shaye (Carol Miller); James Luisi (Ferrari Salesman); Frank Renzulli (Michael Buckley); Duane Davis (Eddie); Kristin Clayton (Juliet Beck); Whitney Reis (Liz); Joey Sagal (Drunk); Jeff Levine (Drunk’s Friend); Mark Edward Morante (Record Store Clerk); Rick Lieberman (Dr. Glass); Joseph Whipp (Dr. Rogers).

CREW: Heron Communications, New Line Cinema, Third Elm Street Venture. *Casting:* Annette Benson. *Music:* Michael Convertino. *Executive Producers:* Stephen Diener, Dennis Harris, Lee Muhl, Jeffrey Klein. *Production Designers:* C.J. and Mick Strawn. *Film Editor:* Michael N. Knue. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Written by:* Bob Hunt. *Produced by:* Robert Shaye, Gerald T. Olson, Michael Meltzer. *Makeup Effects:* Kevin Yagher. *Special Effects:* Marty Bresin, Eric Rylander, Steven Wolke. *Directed by:* Jack Sholder. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A deadly, body-hopping alien is loose in Los Angeles, and it loves stolen Ferraris, rock 'n' roll, and firearms. An FBI agent with a secret, Lloyd Gallagher (MacLachlan), and a good cop, Tom Beck (Nouri), become partners to track down this strange perpetrator, following the alien as it moves from the body of one citizen to another, to the body of a hot stripper (Christian), and then into a police lieutenant (Felder).

Finally, Lloyd confides that he is an alien too, one whose partner and family has been murdered by this intergalactic criminal. Beck comes to believe his story, but are they too late to stop the alien's most dangerous transfer ... into the body of presidential candidate, Senator Holt (McCann).

COMMENTARY: Buddy movies were the rage for a while in the mid-1980s. In the "buddy" formula, two unlike people of equally strong will are forced by either circumstances or authority to undertake a dangerous task together, usually solving a crime. A crook and a cop worked together in such films as *48 Hours* (1983). A crazy suicidal cop and a nice family man partnered in *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and its 1989 sequel. A Russian policeman and an American cop teamed for action in *Red Heat* (1988), and on and on, until it was inevitable, perhaps, that aliens and humans would work together for the betterment of both species. It happened in 1988's *Alien Nation*, a thinly veiled tale about immigrants in America, but the alien-human buddy cop movie came earlier in *The Hidden*, directed by *Alone in the Dark* (1982) auteur, Jack Sholder.

The Hidden posits the arrival on Earth (and in America) of an alien criminal with no impulse control and a hunger to "own" things. Reflecting the conspicuous consumption of the middle class, this character simply takes whatever he wants, whether it be a Porsche ("I want this car") a boom box, or the presidency of the United States. This is the Age of Me, and *my* desire, and so the shape-shifting alien criminal is a manifestation of this modern characteristic. This man

harbors unquenchable urges and when confronted with the suggestion that he needs to own something (as in an ad for a boom box), he steals it. His simple ethos is mistaken in a political speech for forthrightness, certitude and strength. “I want to be president,” he announces simply, and all those around him applaud his statement. This is a candidate who doesn’t beat around the bush! This is a candidate who knows himself! This is a candidate of simple speech.

This candidate is an alien consumer.

The shape shifter is hunted by actor Kyle MacLachlan’s character, an alien policeman who has seen his family murdered by the escaped criminal. *The Hidden* judges what is beautiful to be good, for when MacLachlan finally shifts form at the climax his true state is depicted as a soft, glowing heavenly ray of light. This contrasts strongly with the extra-terrestrial consumer, who is a spidery, fleshy creature that pushes his way in and out of people’s throats.

The Hidden is a good-humored horror-action film that derives most of its laughs from the fish-out-of-water premise that finds Lloyd (MacLachlan) failing to understand strange Earth customs, such as how to use Alka Seltzer. MacLachlan is particularly good at playing the innocent abroad, and Nouri, in his best role since *Flashdance* (1983), mastered the straight-man shtick: the slow burn, the double take, the askew reaction shots. *Babylon 5*’s Claudia Christian also appears and performs a memorable and sexy strip tease, though the alien reveals an interesting notion of sexuality. Instead of wanting to be with the stripper, he chooses to *become* her—an acknowledgment perhaps that it is better in the 1980s to be desired than to feel desire. A similar urge pushes him towards the presidency. He describes an aspiring Senator as “the one everyone applauds,” thus seeking the status of “beloved” not by doing things that would make him adored by people, but—like a diabolical changeling—replace one who’s already done all the hard work.

The Hidden culminates with a slow-motion, bullet-ridden finale and a flame thrower in action. But it’s not so much the action that makes the film memorable, but rather the portrayal of an alien being who wants what he wants when he wants it and then takes it without regard for law, morality, life or limb. In the gilded age of Gordon Gekko and Ivan Boesky, we recognize such characteristics in the human equation too.

House 2: The Second Story

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Arye Gross (Jesse); Jonathan Stark (Charlie); Royal Dano (Gramps); Bill Maher (John Statman); Lar Park Lincoln (Kate); Amy Yasbeck (Lana); Gregory Walcott (Sheriff); Jayne Modean (Rochelle); Dwier Brown (Clarence); Lenora May (Judith); Devin Devasquez (Virgin); John Ratzenberger (Bill).

CREW: New World Pictures Presents a Sean S. Cunningham Production, an Ethan Wiley film. *Casting:* Melissa Skoff. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Production Design:* Gregg Fonseca. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Makeup and Creature Effects Designed by:* Chris Walas. *Film Editor:* Marty Nicholson. *Associate Producer:* Andrew Z. Davis. *Produced by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *Directed by:* Ethan Wiley. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Lovable loser Jesse McLaughlin (Gross) inherits the house where his parents were murdered twenty-five years earlier. He moves in with his girlfriend Kate (Lincoln) and immediately plays host to his dim-witted drinking buddy, Charlie (Stark) and his girl, Lana (Yasbeck), an aspiring rock star. Together, Jesse and Charlie go in search of a legendary crystal skull that is supposed to give immortality to its owner, and the trail leads them to the grave of Jesse's outlaw grandfather (Dano). Gramps is actually alive in the grave and warns his two new friends that a rival gunslinger, Slim Razor, also wants to possess the all-powerful skull—and murdered Jesse's parents while in search of it.

Before long, Jesse's haunted house begins opening doorways to other dimensions and times, including the Stone Age, an Aztec sacrificial ritual, and the Old West. Finally, with a baby pterodactyl and Aztec virgin in tow, Jesse, Charlie and Gramps must survive a shoot-out with the malevolent Slim Razor.

COMMENTARY: Whoa! What happened here? The 1985 movie *House* was a modest little horror hit, one that (like so many films of that era, from *Fright Night* to *Return of the Living Dead*) successfully blended comedy and terror. Why, the soundtrack even included some great rock 'n' roll tunes to perk up those ears! Certainly, *House* was no high watermark for the haunted house genre, but it was nonetheless a respectable, well-produced comic book-type venture with a modicum of thrills.

So what's up with *House 2: The Second Story*? Why is the sequel to a passable film so inconsequential, dull, and generically bland that not the slightest shiver is generated during its eighty-eight-minute running time?

The answer to that question, one suspects, has a lot to do with the entertainment business, and the all-important task of franchise-building. Perhaps the makers of *House* and *House 2* gazed around at *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th* and the like and merely read the handwriting on the wall. Judging from increasingly silly series entries (like *Nightmare III: Dream Warriors*, which saw Freddy go after Zsa Zsa Gabor), maybe the makers of *House* determined that "rubber reality" fantasy was the direction to take their new franchise. And efforts like *Jason Lives* boasted a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor, so their film could do that too. Special effects and comedy could trump scares, but still offer "a roller coaster ride" of sorts.

The problem with this decision is that *House 2* is neither a particularly funny film, nor a very exciting one. And a horror movie is not the place for a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-style "relic" hunt featuring a cute old ghost named Gramps. The audience that went to see (and liked) *House* did not necessarily appreciate a film that featured a cute baby pterodactyl, prehistoric puppies, and a cowboy ghost (who—sacrilege—calls Ronald Reagan a "pansy"!). And the time-hopping comedy shtick seems a weak attempt to capture some of *Back to the Future*'s (1985) luster.

The fastest way to kill a franchise is to discard everything that made the first film enjoyable, and go off in an entirely new direction. ... otherwise known as a dead end or blind alley. Which doesn't mean that the makers of *House 2* couldn't have featured a new house, new characters and a new story, merely that the jarring shift from horror-comedy to comedy-fantasy is disconcerting, and not at all representative of the first film in the series. When William Katt's character confronted the ghosts in *House*, he was confronting his own past in Vietnam, his own "demons." The so-called "fantasy" sequences were thus character-based there, at least to a passable degree. The fantasy sequences in *House 2* are pure phantasmagoria, related neither to character or sense.

In another bit of franchise pandering, *House 2* features a cameo by John Ratzenberger of *Cheers* (1982–93) fame as an enterprising electrician. Remember, Cliff Clavin's buddy Norm (George Wendt) starred in the original *House*? So, there's another *Cheers* connection in the sequel! Get it? Actually, Ratzenberger is the only funny character

in this film, so it's a good thing he's in the picture. He's pompous, self-important, and delightful. "It looks like you've got some alternate universe in there," his know-it-all character states at one point. Now that's funny.

The idea informing *House 2* is that a character can open any door in this "haunted" house and be confronted with a surprise. That surprise might be scary (a ghostly gunslinger!), fantastic (Aztecs! Dinosaurs!) or just plain funny. Unfortunately, every door in *House 2* opens to a world of disappointment. Although the dinosaur jungle depicted in the film is quite beautiful, and lovingly created, it has absolutely nothing to do with the rest of the film, and so ultimately, even it seems unimpressive.

Ding dong: *The House* series is dead.

Howling 3: The Marsupials

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Barry Otto (Harry Beckmeyer); Max Fairchild (Thylo); Imogen Annesley (Jerboah); Dasha Blahova (Olga); Leigh Biolos (Donny); Ralph Cotterill (Professor Sharp); Frank Thring (Jack Citron); Michael Pate (President); John Ewing (General Foster); Barry Humphries (Academy Award Presenter); Tony Deary (Max); Andreas Bayonaz (Zac; 23 Years); Danielle Sharp (Grace at 18).

CREW: A Philippe Mora, Charles Waterstreet Production, a Philippe Mora Film. *Casting:* Forcast. *Director of Photography:* Louis Irving. *Production Design and Costumes:* Ross Major. *Prosthetics & Special Makeup Design by:* Bob McCarron. *Film Editor:* Lee Smith. *Associate Producer:* Bob McCarron. *Music:* Allan Zavod. *Executive Producers:* Steve Lane, Robert Pringle, Edward Simons. *Based upon the book The Howling III by:* Gary Brandner. *Screen story and screenplay by:* Philippe Mora. *Co-Producer:* Gilda Baracchi. *Producers:* Charles Waterstreet, Philippe Mora. *Directed by:* Philippe Mora. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a werewolf sighting in Siberia, the U.S. president asks Beckmeyer (Otto), an anthropology professor, whose grandfather disappeared in the outback years earlier, to go to Australia and bring him back "hard evidence" of the existence of werewolves. Meanwhile, a werewolf girl, Jerboah (Annesley), flees her cruel, abusive stepfather

(who tried to rape her) for Sydney.

Once there, she is cast in a werewolf movie called *Shapeshifters Part 8*. However, while Jerboah grapples with her heritage, three werewolf nuns pursue. After she has a sexual relationship with a man named Donny (Biolos) and gets pregnant, the werewolves capture Jerboah and take her back to the town of Flow (that's wolf spelled backwards). Donny and Beckmeyer meet up at Flow to rescue Jerboah.

COMMENTARY: *Howling 3: The Marsupials* represents a step up in quality from the abysmal *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf* (1986). Still, that's rather like being voted the nicest inmate in prison. The third film in the seemingly interminable *Howling* cycle is still but a shadow of the Joe Dante original.

As was the case with *Howling II*, the special effects and werewolf costumes are atrocious to the point of embarrassment in *The Marsupials*, and the acting is uniformly dreadful. However, in his own quasi-inept fashion, Mora attempts to craft *The Marsupials* as some sort of a satire, and that aspect of the film makes it feel a hair smarter than the Stirba outing. At least there's a sense of lightness about *The Marsupials* that buoys it at the oddest times. The film even pokes fun at *The Beast Within* (Mora's 1981 film, for which a poster is seen) and his earlier efforts.

Nor is it difficult to discern that the gag about *Shapeshifters Part 8* is a dig at a *Howling* series that has outlived its usefulness. Still, if Mora truly felt this why (and he wrote the script), why direct a second werewolf film?

In addition to werewolf nuns (a concept funnier in concept than execution) *Howling 3* makes plenty of post-modern, movie-within-a-movie jokes. For instance, the *Shapeshifters Part 8* director is a Hitchcock lookalike, down to his speech patterns and mannerisms. And there's a version of the Oscars at the end of the film that is hampered by the appearance (and transformation) of a major star.

The U.S. president in *Howling 3* is an older gentleman who is seen, at one point, pumping iron. This activity mimics Reagan's famous *Parade Magazine* cover and photo shoot wherein he shared his work-out tips. Though Republicans always complain about Bill Clinton being a media whore, talking endlessly about boxer or briefs on MTV, it's clear Reagan was a pioneer at this sort of thing. He knew a good photo op when he saw one, when the presidency was but a gleam in Clinton's (wandering) eye.

Evidencing more of the Steven Spielberg-ization of the horror genre in the late 1980s, the PG-13 *Howling 3* makes efforts not so much to scare the audience, but to engender sympathy for the werewolves, who here are being hunted to the brink of extinction because they are “evolutionary freaks.” This means the film features a tender scene wherein Jerboah gives birth to her cuddly, fuzzy baby, and nurtures it in her marsupial pouch ... a scene that is both weird and kinky. Beckmeyer wants the werewolves to live in freedom and dignity, and so he helps the lycanthropes escape from the Army.

Of course, viewers who keep track of such things will realize that this understanding, live-and-let-live approach represents a major turnaround from *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf*, in which occult investigator Crosscoe (Christopher Lee) was devoted to exterminating the fornicating and evil werewolves. This change in franchise core concepts is just further evidence of the series’ erosion in quality. There’s no consistency from one entry to another, and ultimately *The Marsupials* took *The Howling* so far astray from its origins, that the next film, the direct-to-video *Howling IV*, had to be subtitled with the nudging moniker, *The Original Nightmare* to attempt to draw back viewers who had suffered through two generally abysmal sequels to the 1981 masterpiece.

As for director Philippe Mora, *Howling 3: The Marsupials*, his third genre effort in the 1980s, makes his record during the decade a dismal zero for three.

It's Alive 3: Island of the Alive

★ ★

Critical Reception

“If there’s a weak film in this series, it’s this one—too much time had passed between Cohen’s first two mutant baby films and this one, and perhaps Larry had too much time to think. The mutant babies aren’t particularly effective in a bigger model, and you basically have to be a fan of the series to like this film. Some of the scenes on the ‘Island of the Alive’ were interesting in a *Jurassic Park* kind of way, but this film deviated a little too much from the formula of the first two for its own good.”—William Latham, author, *Eternity Unbound*, *Mary’s Monster*, *Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Moriarity (Steven Jarvis); Karen Black (Ellen); Laurene Landon (Sally); Gerrit Graham (Ralston); James Dixon (Lt. Perkins); Neal Israel (Dr. Brewster); Macdonald Carey (Judge Milton Watson); Art Lund (Dr. Swenson); Anne Dane (Dr. Morrell); William Watson (Cabot); C.I. Sussex (Hunter); Patch Mackenzie (Robbins); Rick Garia (Tony); Carlos Palomino (First Cuban); Tony Abatemarco (Second Cuban); Gladys Portuegese (Waitress); Joann Lara (Second Waitress); Robby Ramsen (TV Host); Kevin O'Conner (Cab Driver); John Woehrle (First Cop).

CREW: A Larco Production, a Larry Cohen Film. *Film Editor:* David Kern. *Director of Photography:* Daniel Pearl. *Music:* Laurie Johnson. *Original "It's Alive" Theme Composed by:* Bernard Herrmann. *Original "It's Alive" Creature designed by:* Rick Baker. *Executive Producer:* Larry Cohen. *Produced by:* Paul Stader. *Based on characters created by:* Larry Cohen. *Written and Directed by:* Larry Cohen. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: “How would you feel if you were born into a world that looked at you and wanted you dead?”—The side of the mutant baby is argued in court, in Larry Cohen’s sequel to *It’s Alive* (1973) and *It Lives Again* (1978).

SYNOPSIS: In court, actor Steven Jarvis (Moriarity) argues for the life of his young child, one of the murderous mutant babies that have been appearing with alarming regularity in recent months. The court decides not to take the baby’s life, and five of the monstrous children are taken to a desert island to live out the rest of their natural lives in peace. Over time, however, societal curiosity grows, and a group of hunters go to the island to kill the mutants on the orders of a drug company that believes it may be liable for their creation. Meanwhile, Steven regrets his decision to separate from his boy, and also heads to the island in hopes of a reunion.

COMMENTARY: Larry Cohen’s original *It’s Alive* is a 1970s horror classic. In *Horror Films of the 1970s*, I noted the following about that film:

It’s about people who, through no fault of their own, give birth to something horrible. Society condemns them, and tries to destroy both their creation and their reputation. Amidst that pressure, the family clings together, and even tries to love what has caused them so much strife. In this regard, the movie is actually about the human heart, and the capacity to love unconditionally. It is remarkable.²²

Unfortunately, the second sequel to *It's Alive* is not a great, or even a good follow-up to the sterling originator of the series. This is especially ironic, since *It's Alive 3* picks up the storyline with intelligence, cannily dramatizing what happens when a "civilized" society suddenly is struck by an outbreak of mutant babies. This thoughtful, even logical approach is typical of Larry Cohen's work, I believe. His films don't always look good or hold together, yet they're universally fascinating on a thematic level.

It's Alive 3 tells the story of Steve Jarvis, a character played by the incomparable Michael Moriarity in one of the actor's patented oddball performances. He's a guy whose wife gave birth to one of the monster babies, then left him to take care of it. Jarvis goes to court to defend the life of his baby, but once in the docket is publicly forced to take responsibility for his abnormal offspring. Jarvis is made to acknowledge his child, and there are feelings of shame, guilt and blame here in the accepting of a "perversion of everything human."

Jarvis, an actor by trade, wants to put the whole matter behind him, but, since this is modern America, instead he is forced to merchandise and promote the case. *Entertainment Tonight* wants to interview him, and Jarvis turns his tragedy into a best-selling book called *A Parent's Story*. In this portion of the film, Cohen's allegory truly finds its footing, even while the satire steadfastly ignores the expected horror and "baby attack" scenes. The point to Jarvis's story is that in 1980s, tabloid-TV America, suffering is not only broadcast nationally for the entertainment of others, but capitalized on, exploited, and merchandised to the hilt.

But Jarvis doesn't forget his son and even grows to accept him, after a fashion. On the Island of the Alive, he protects the monsters, even though they eat humans.

"How could you side with them against the human race?" one character asks, and Moriarity's unspoken answer is one that all parents might understood: The monster is also *his child*. And, the film suggests, perhaps the mutants shouldn't be killed. Maybe they're God's creations too, a logical next step in human evolution, a jump in the pattern since the monsters would likely survive a nuclear war.

In the end, Jarvis discovers that his son has selected a mate, even had a son. Jarvis is a grandfather! When he learns that the grown mutants are dying, susceptible to measles, he and his estranged wife do what many families do: They come together to help. The last frames of the film indicate that the monsters feel human love for each other (they

hold hands), and furthermore, that they understand the value of family. They have hijacked a ship and returned to human civilization not to attack people, but to return home; to find family and ask that family to protect their children. In the end, Jarvis and his wife drive away protecting their grandson. It's a chance for them to accept something they couldn't accept at first.

So, in its own fashion, *It's Alive 3* is sharp, given its criticism of TV and the media, and touching, treading on the selfsame observations about the "human heart" that made the first film so thoughtful. Yet—shockingly—*It's Alive 3* still doesn't gell. Part of the problem is that the film features some really dodgy special effects. The monsters have grown up and the suits do not look convincing (especially when the matured mutants take to wearing clothes). They look like a cross between the Fantastic Four's The Thing and the Toxic Avenger. Alas, the monsters are not kept in shadows, or off-screen. They are seen in full daylight, full view, many times, and every glimpse of them undercuts the seriousness of the story and reminds audiences that this is just a cheesy, campy monster movie.

There are other weaknesses as well. There's a strange detour to Cuba that should have been left out of the film, and which requires that Jarvis is captured and released by Cubans and makes it back to the United States at precisely the right time to meet up with his wife and the mutants again. There's also very little that's interesting about a battle between punk gang on the Cape Vale boardwalk at the film's conclusion.

Even the best directors stumble occasionally, and this is Larry Cohen's. Although it's thoughtful, droll and even on occasion, touching, *It's Alive 3* is ultimately a bizarre, unsatisfying ride, filled with narrative dead ends. It's awkwardly paced, and the monsters will inspire neither audience affection nor terror. Only guffaws.

Jaws: The Revenge



Critical Reception

"...the absolute nadir of bad sequels and a movie so stupid it cannot even be discussed with a straight face ... To say that the premise doesn't play is a major understatement, and the film is also not helped by its uniformly awful performances..."—William Arnold, "*Jaws Bites*

Anyone Stupid Enough to Buy a Ticket," *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, July 21, 1987, page C5.

"Lorraine Gary looks quite old and tired. During the climax, when she ... heads towards a rendezvous with the Great White, her expression unmistakably says, 'Let's get this over with.'"—Thomas B. Harrison, "The Great White's Revenge Should Have Stayed Under," *The St. Petersburg Times*, July 22, 1987, page 2D.

"This *Jaws* isn't scary enough to be taken seriously and isn't camp enough to be funny. Even if you are rooting for the shark, which a good part of the preview audience was inclined to do, it looks so mechanical that it fails as a villain you love to hate."—Linnea Lannon, "Boredom is the Biggest Threat in *Jaws: The Revenge*," *The Detroit Free Press*, July 19, 1986, page 6F.

"Which sequel is the last in a series? The one that loses money. This is a hurting film, with an opening that had a lot of promise—nice little return to Amity, the music was in the spirit of the original. And it's all downhill from there. Did Michael Caine make any good movies in the 1980s? And pity poor Lance Guest—*Halloween II* and *Jaws: The Revenge* in the same career—no wonder *The Last Starfighter* didn't make him a star. The director of this film did some fine work in his television days. The typical Three Stooges short has a better ending than this film, and I mean that in the worst possible way. This film made *Jaws 3D* look like a classic."—William Latham, author, *Eternity Unbound, Mary's Monster, Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lorraine Gary (Ellen Brody); Lance Guest (Michael Brody); Mario Van Peebles (Jake); Karen Young (Carla); Judith Barsi (Thea Brody); Lynn Whitfield (Louisa); Mitchell Anderson (Sean Brody); Michael Caine (Hoagie); Jay Mello (Young Sean); Cedric Scott (Clarence); Charles Bowley (William); Edna Billotto (Polly); Fritz Jane Courntey (Mrs. Taft); Cyprian R. Dube (Mayor); Lee Fierro (Mrs. Kintner); John Griffin (Man in Boat).

CREW: A Joseph Sargent Film. *Casting:* Nancy Naylor. *Music composed and arranged by:* Michael Small. *Theme from Jaws by:* John Williams. *Associate Producer:* Frank Baer. *Film Editor:* Michael Brown. *Production Design:* John J. Lloyd. *Director of Photography:* John McPherson. *Based on Characters created by:* Peter Benchley. *Written by:* Michael de Guzman. *Produced and Directed by:* Joseph Sargent. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

"It will be a serious movie by returning to some of the Benchley book and the Spielberg movie ... In this film, we are taking into account the growth factor—the original audience has grown up."²³—Joseph Sargent, on the merits of *Jaws: The Revenge*.

SYNOPSIS: Amity's Chief Brody is dead of a heart attack, and his son, Deputy Sean Brody (Anderson), is killed by a shark as Christmas nears. His traumatized mother Ellen (Gary) believes that there is a great white shark with a vendetta against the Brody family and flees to the Bahamas to be with her only surviving son, Michael (Guest), a marine biologist with an artist wife, Carla (Young), and a young daughter named Thea (Barsi). Once there, Ellen romances a gambler-pilot named Hoagie (Caine) and reveals to him her fear of sharks.

Before long, the shark that killed Sean in Amity, New York, has reached the Bahamas and begins to attack swimmers. Convinced it is she who the shark is after, Ellen commandeers a boat called *Neptune's Folly* to engage the shark at sea. Hoagie, Michael and a friend named Jake (Van Peebles) mobilize to assist her, flying out to sea just as the shark and the boat engage in deadly combat. Hoagie sinks the plane and he and Michael and Jake swim to Mrs. Brody's aid as the final battle nears.

COMMENTARY: *Jaws: The Revenge* concerns the protective impulses of motherhood, a matriarch's overwhelming desire and capability to protect her own brood from all comers ... even vengeful great white sharks. This fourth edition in the *Jaws* saga shares a facet in common with James Cameron's brilliant *Aliens* (1986). Both horrors chart the ways in which motherhood can put steel in a woman's spine. The true gulf between these two films arises not so much in terms of theme, but rather quality. Whereas *Aliens* quite possibly ranks among the best horror films of the 1980s, *Jaws: The Revenge* lands at the ass-end of that spectrum. In fact, it's a film notorious for being ill-conceived, ridiculous, and poorly executed.



The shark with a vendetta rears its villainous head in *Jaws: The Revenge* (1987).

Twenty years after its theatrical release, all those gripes against *Jaws: The Revenge* hold true. The descriptor “ill-conceived” is probably the best place to commence a discussion of *Jaws: The Revenge*’s numerous shortcomings. Ignoring the fact that the film takes place in an alternate universe where *Jaws 3-D* never occurred (that’s okay, I tried to forget that film too), let’s start with the film’s central idea. *Jaws: The Revenge* was advertised with the much-derided ad line, “This time, it’s personal,” and that explains the problem. Why? Because the narrative involves, as the title suggests, a great white shark’s personal vendetta against the Brody family. It’s also personal because now Ellen Brody also wants revenge against the shark for harming her family. But who is this shark that wants revenge? Is it the son of *Jaws*? Son of *Jaws II*? Or just an activist shark, looking to legislate from the beach? Logic suggests that sharks have entirely different motivations than humans, so it is illogical to build a film around a shark’s bloody vengeance. It makes no sense, and it leads to further complications in plotting.

To wit, how does the shark detect “Brodys” amidst all the other swimmers? Does it have a Brody radar that selects targets? If Chief Brody (the absent Roy Scheider) is a full Brody, are his sons “half-Brodys” and his grandchild a quarter Brody? Is the shark able to detect all of these nuances and home in the right family like a Brody-seeking missile? If the shark is indeed capable of this level of precision and accuracy, why is it that the shark bungles the attack on the

banana boat and kills the child seated right next to a Brody, rather than Thea, Michael's little girl? The film wants to have it both ways. It wants audiences to believe that the shark can select its targets like a military computer, but then turn around and miss that target when push comes to shove. Right.

Furthermore, how does the great white shark come to understand—unless there is a mole in the Brody clan—that the Brody family has pulled up stakes from Amity and headed down to the Bahamas? Who spilled the beans to the shark? Come on, fess up! And furthermore, how did said shark swim from the United State's East Coast to the Bahamas in a few hours? Is someone helping the shark? Someone equipped with a submarine?

The idea of a great white shark targeting on a single family, and pursuing it around the world (apparently at warp speed), makes no sense on any level. Of course, the film could have attempted to put a more definitive supernatural spin on the proceedings, indicating that the shark is a spawn of the Devil, assisted in his quest by the Dark One, but that's really stretching things. The ridiculous premise of *Jaws: The Revenge* sinks the film right off the bat.

Yet *Jaws: The Revenge* is a bad film for a variety of reasons that involve execution as much as conception. The first shark attack, on Sean Brody in Amity Harbor, is rendered virtually indecipherable through a combination of poorly chosen techniques. Close-up shots, quick cutting, and cross-cutting are all used here to weak effect. The audience can barely make out a glimpse of shark's teeth, a bloody yellow slicker and the like during the frenetic assault, but then the film cuts too quickly to the rest of the revelers singing Christmas carols in safety elsewhere. This is meant to be ironic, no doubt, but the end result is a scene that suggests the film simply couldn't afford to reveal a realistic shark-to-man confrontation.

But the worst is saved for last. During the final battle between Mrs. Brody's ship, *Neptune's Folly*, and the evil shark, the movie literally jumps the shark. Or more accurately, the shark jumps the movie. For the shark leaps out of the water (looking really phony) and in that exact instance when it is vulnerable and out of the water—in mid-leap—it is speared by the bow of the boat. The odds of this all working out in quite this fashion, in Mrs. Brody's favor, must be astronomical. Basically, the shark speared itself by jumping out of the water as the boat was approaching. It's utterly ridiculous.

But there's more. As the shark approaches its Waterloo, on the

soundtrack, the sound effect of a lion or tiger growling is heard, as though the shark itself is growling at the ship and Mrs. Brody. I wasn't aware that sharks produced vocalizations like this. Or better yet, that when a shark is speared by a ship's mast, the very next thing it will do is *explode!* That's right. It's as though the shark had orders to self-destruct should it fail its mission to assassinate the remainder of the Brody clan.



A view of terror. Left: Jake (Mario Van Peebles) helps Lance Guest (Michael Brody) after a run-in with the shark.

I hasten to add that the finale of *Jaws: The Revenge* also relies on stock footage. As the shark nears the ship and gets ready to impale itself,

Mrs. Brody recalls Chief Brody fighting the shark at sea, from the deck of the sinking *Orca*. This clip from the climax of *Jaws* is meant to serve as a flashback. The only problem is that Mrs. Brody was not present in the climax of *Jaws*, and therefore she should not be privy to memories and images of that final, infinitely more exciting battle.

All this, and the shark still looks phony. At one point early in the film, the audience can clearly see a seam on the mechanical shark, and at the end of the film, following the animal's death, one can actually detect the waves in "the ocean" splashing against the back wall of a water tank which has been painted to appear like clouds and sky.

Really, the problems with *Jaws: The Revenge* could fill this entire book. Lorraine Gary is the lead, and she's an actress of limited range. From a certain perspective, perhaps it could be considered bold, even brave to cast a grandmother in the lead of an action movie, but Gary too often comes off as blank or disengaged. Mario Van Peebles adopts an embarrassingly bad "islands" accent that only serves to point out how dreadful his banter is with co-star Guest, and poor Michael Caine suffers several indignities in the film. Not the least of which is that he emerges on *Neptune Folly*'s deck after crashing his plane into the ocean, and he's virtually dry. Someone should have hosed the guy down at least a little.

The low quality of *Jaws: The Revenge* is a bit baffling, given that the film has been directed by Joseph Sargent, the talent who gave the world the efficient horror anthology *Nightmares*, and the brilliant 1970 sci-fi film *Colossus: The Forbin Project*. But Sargent's entry in the *Jaws* saga accomplished something that not even the equally wretched *Jaws 3-D* failed to accomplish.

It scuttled *Jaws*. Permanently.

The Lost Boys

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"[F]or the most part, a stylishly shot, hard-rocking, teen horror comedy ... But look a little closer and you'll find social commentary and a psychological sub-text intended to give contemporary significance to age-old conventions of supernatural mythology..."—Bob Strauss, "*Lost Boys* gives old myths new blood," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 2, 1987, page 7.

"[A] free-wheeling, high-spirited dose of summer escapism ... Schumacher balances the horror and the comedy almost evenly, and he times the switches from one to the other with a delicate touch that keeps the audience guessing what's coming next."—Jeff Strickler, "*The*

Lost Boys—Comedy of Horrors is a fast-paced treat,” *The Star Tribune*, August 3, 1987, page 01C.

“...surely in the running for the worst of the year...”—Carole Kass, “*Lost Boys: Hidden Horror*,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 1, 1987, page A-10.

“The first half of *Lost Boys* ... is so consistently entertaining and inventive that you keep wondering whether Schumacher and his writers ... will be able to sustain their high-style critique of pop culture, which marries images to the hot sound track so effectively (especially the Doors’s ‘People Are Strange’) that the film becomes more than feature-length music video...”—Lou Lumenick, “Good, Gory Fun With Teeth,” *The Record*, July 31, 1987, page 26.

“This film had loser written all over it, but it works surprisingly well. The Jim Morrison poster in the ‘bat cave’ should have tipped us that we were in for something special. Wonderfully cast and scored, with a third act that captured the sense of fun of the best kind of films, this is one of the better vampire movies in recent history.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

“This movie delivers entertainment by the bucketload. The scares are punctuated by moments of humor instead of being insulted by them.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jason Patric (Michael); Corey Feldman (Edgar Frog); Jami Gertz (Star); Corey Haim (Sammy); Edward Herrmann (Max); Barnard Hughes (Grandpa); Kiefer Sutherland (David); Dianne Wiest (Lucy); Chance Michael Corbitt (Laddie); Alex Winter (Marco); Billy Wirth (Dwayne); Jamison Newlander (Alan Frog); Kelly Jo Minter (Maria); Brooke McCarter (Paul).

CREW: Warner Bros. Presents a Richard Donner production, a Joel Schumacher Film. *Casting:* Marion Daugherty. *Co-Executive Producers:* Mark Damon, John Hyde. *Music:* Thomas Newman. *Film Editor:* Robert Brown. *Production Designer:* Bo Welch. *Director of Photography:* Michael Chapman. *Executive Producer:* Richard Donner. *Story by:* Janice Fischer, James Jermias. *Screenplay by:* Janice Fischer, James Jermias, Jeffrey Boam. *Costume Designer:* Susan Becker. *Producer:* Harvey Bernhard. *Vampire prosthetics and effects by:* Greg Cannom. *Directed by:* Joel Schumacher. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Michael (Patric), his brother Sam (Haim), Mom (Wiest)

and dog Nanook move in with eccentric Grandpa (Hughes) in his home in sunny Santa Clara, the murder capital of the world. Sam soon learns from comic-book shop owners Edgar Frog (Feldman) and Alan Frog (Newlander) that the municipality also happens to be overrun by vampires. Michael finds it out the hard way when—in romantic pursuit of Star (Gertz)—he runs afoul of a gang of motorcyclists and vampires led by the charismatic David (Sutherland).

These so-called “lost boys,” who prowl the boardwalk and amusement park, indoctrinate Michael into their ways. When he drinks David’s blood out of a wine bottle, Michael becomes a vampire himself: casting no reflection and boasting a deadly allergy to sunlight. Sam and the Frog brothers determine that if they can kill the head vampire, Michael and Star will return to normal, but an ambush on David’s underground lair goes badly. David retaliates by launching a full-scale attack on Grandpa’s house with his gang. But even then, the identity of the master vampire is a secret.

COMMENTARY: The year 1987 gave the horror genre two great vampire movies. Both visualize vampires as addicts of sorts, but one film (*Near Dark*) is somber and ethereal and the other rollicking fun and a little tongue-in-cheek. The latter is *The Lost Boys*, the tale of a teenager who falls in with the wrong crowd—a pack of vampires on motorcycles—and is ultimately rescued by the love of his family.

Although Michael (a young Jason Patric) doesn’t realize it when he first meets David and the rest of the miscreants, he’s driving over a cliff in hooking up with them. The movie makes this point literally during a motorcycle race to Hudson’s Bluff, when David nearly edges Michael off a precipice.

This adrenaline-provoking scene, shot during foggy night-time at a pace nearing one hundred miles an hour, simultaneously reveals both the allure and danger of life as a vampire. On one hand, Michael (much like Caleb in *Near Dark*) seeks something a little dangerous, a little wild, but on the other hand, that something wild threatens his life.

Michael drinks from the wrong bottle of wine (it’s actually blood) and becomes a vampire. This lifestyle is depicted as an adolescent’s paradise: staying up all night, carousing, remaining forever young ... and never, ever dying. Indeed, the film earns its title because in the film immortality is the stuff of Never-Never Land, an adolescent’s musings. The film also depicts vampirism as a kind of hangover or drug haze that makes you sleep late the next day, don glasses inside

and adopt a devil-may-care aura of detachment. That's all true for Michael until it's time to pay the piper. When Michael undergoes the equivalent of withdrawal pains, the price for this carefree life is made abundantly plain: He must kill and feed on other mortals.



Gang leader David (Kiefer Sutherland) bares his fangs in Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys* (1987).

Luckily for Michael, his mother and brother Sammy stage the equivalent of a vampire intervention with the help of the Frog

brothers. They recognize his new, antisocial behavior as dangerous, and attempt to free him from the curse. “Even though you’re a vampire, you’re still my brother,” Sammy says, and indeed that’s the reassuring message of *The Lost Boys*. Unlike the vampires, who have an absent father figure in the Master Vampire, Michael’s family clings together in times of crisis, and that’s why ultimately they’re victorious.

The Lost Boys is vetted by director Joel Schumacher in robust, strapping fashion. He stages wild airborne shots (from the vampire’s perspective) bearing down on screaming victims. His camera glides over boardwalks and precipices and mountains. There’s even a death of a rock ‘n’ roll-type vampire “by stereo,” in one explosive moment. Best of all, however, Schumacher stages the final battle in mid-air using wires, as though this movie is an early version of *The Matrix* (1999). Flying vampires Michael and David wrestle high above the floor of Grandpa’s study in a thoroughly satisfying and intense climax.

The film also derives much humor from its vampires and in particular, the Frog brothers. The comic-book store owners are given to Rambo-esque dialogue about “kicking night-stalking asses” and so forth, and some of this might come across as campy, but for every moment of unadulterated, sophomoric fun, *The Lost Boys* provides a moment of genuine terror. Kiefer Sutherland is highly effective as the dreamy-voiced cult leader, David, a particularly rough customer. In vampire regalia and makeup, Sutherland makes for a dynamite boogeyman.

Decked out with its flying P.O.V. shots, a soundtrack that includes The Doors and some quirky humor from old Barnard Hughes, *The Lost Boys* is the perfect summer horror entertainment. It’s light and breezy, it includes a bit of subtext, and it’s even sexy. Cheesy too. But it was the eighties, after all.

Monster in the Closet

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Donald Grant (Richard Clark); Denise Du Barry (Diane Bennett); Claude Akins (Sheriff Sam); Howard Duff (Father Martin); Henry Gibson (Phillip Pennyworth); Donald Moffat (General Turnball); Paul Dooley (Roy); John Carradine (Old Joe); Frank Ashmore (Scoop Johnson); Paul Walker (The Professor); Jesse White

(Ben Bernstein); Stella Stevens (Margo Crane); Kevin Peter Hall (Monster).

CREW: Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz present a Troma Team Release, a Bergquist-Levy Production of a Bob Dahlin Film. *Associate Producers:* Michel Billot, Terrence Corey, Robert Rock; *Production Design:* Lynda Cohen. *Film Editors:* Raja Gospell, Stephanie Palewski. *Music:* Barrie Guard. *Director of Photography:* Ronald W. McLeish. *Story:* Bob Dahlin, Peter L. Bergquist. *Executive Producers:* Lloyd Laufman, Michael Herz. *Produced by:* David Levy, Peter L. Bergquist. *Written and Directed by:* Bob Dahlin. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An inexperienced reporter, Richard Clark (Grant) of the San Francisco *Daily Globe*, is assigned to investigate a strange case in Chestnut Hills about three citizens who have been found murdered in their closets.

In the quaint little town, Richard meets scientist Phillip Pennyworth (Gibson), college professor, Diane (Du Barry) and her genius son, The Professor (Walker), who all share theories about the monster and its strange origins. After the town sheriff (Akins) is killed by the gruesome monster, the Army arrives, but even gung-ho General Turnball (Moffat) can't destroy the seemingly invincible creature, which seems to draw strength from ... the closet.

After Phillip is killed trying to communicate with the monster, Chestnut Hills is evacuated as the country prepares for a reign of terror. Diane and Richard remain behind in town alone and attempt to kill the closet monster with electricity, but fail. The Professor, who has stayed behind, uses his invention, the ultrasonic energy augmenter, and it too fails. Finally, the monster sweeps Richard up in its arms and leaves Chestnut Hills. Diane comes to realize that the only way to destroy the creature is to destroy all closets.

COMMENTARY: *Monster in the Closet* is a sincere effort to create a 1950s-style monster movie in the 1980s. However, in its scattershot attempt to garner laughs in any way possible, it vacillates in tone, and some performances come across as too broad or intentionally funny when what the material requires is merely a deadpan earnestness, a straight-playing of the odd material.

Aficionados of 1950s horror films will enjoy elements of *Monster in the Closet*. A pacifist scientist straight out of Howard Hawks' *The Thing from Another World* (1951) attempts to communicate with the monster

and is killed while waving the equivalent of a white flag (*The War of the Worlds*). The Army plays an important role in the proceedings (like it did in *Them!*) and a smart child plays a prominent role (as he did in the 1953 *Invaders from Mars*). A small town is imperiled (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), and electricity seems—at one point—the key to killing the monster (*The Thing* again). In some respects, the lead character, a reporter, physically resembles 1950s TV hero Superman, or more accurately, Clark Kent.

The closing moments of the film reflect the granddaddy of monster movies, *King Kong* (1933). “It wasn’t the closet that did it,” Howard Duff’s priest intones solemnly, gazing at Richard. “It was beauty that killed the beast.” The film ends with church bells ringing, an image and sound which again evokes memories of *War of the Worlds*. Even the monster (played by Kevin Peter Hall) bears more than a passing resemblance to the space monster in *Night of the Blood Beast* (1958).

Monster in the Closet has fun with each and every one of these clichés. Gibson is great as a scientist who appears to be a dead ringer for Albert Einstein, and the movie pulls a wicked prank by making the Fay Wray character in the film a man. Indeed, there’s a way to read a whole sexual sub-text into this movie. A monster emerges from the closet and falls in love with beauty ... a man! He dies after showing his vulnerability, when society destroys the closets he hid in.

Still, any evocation of 1950s-era monster movies should understand that those movies thrived on the professionalism of the casts. Before special effects were utterly believable and convincing, it took the effort of stolid, serious, even grim actors with names like Peter Graves and James Arness to “sell” these movies. If they had cracked a smile, it would have been over. If they indicated they felt the material was silly, the films would have collapsed. If they played their roles with tongue in cheek, the movies would not have been classics. Oppositely, the actors in *Monster in the Closet* tend to play broad, going for big, two-dimensional laughs when a degree of subtlety is required.

Monster in the Closet shifts wildly in tone from scene to scene. It opens with a number of death scenes in which the monster attacks characters in the closet (including John Carradine). The deaths are off-screen: all the audience sees is clothes thrown out of the closet. It’s purposefully silly, and can’t be squared with scenes later in the film in which director Bob Dahlin attempts to garner genuine thrills. A movie like this can’t eat its cake and have it too. It can’t make some deaths objects of laughter, and then try to milk tension from other deaths later. That kind of inconsistency wrecks the movie.

Also, there's a funny dig at *Psycho*'s famous shower scene, featuring the great Stella Stevens and Paul Dooley. It is timed perfectly for comedy, but again, there's a question if it actually belongs in the movie. It doesn't fit the monster formula and *Psycho* is a completely different kind of movie than movies like *War of the Worlds* and *Them!* It's the fourth "closet death" scene in the movie, so it doesn't even push the narrative ahead. Again, it's timed for straight-out comedy, which clashes with some of the monster scenes later.

Some of *Monster in the Closet* is really inventive, but audiences will feel ambivalent watching it. Are we supposed to care about the characters or just laugh at them? The movie doesn't decide, and so viewers can't.

LEGACY: Paul Walker, the little kid with the ultrasonic energy augmenter, grew up to be a movie star. He has starred in *The Skulls* (2000), *Joy Ride* (2001), *Timeline* (2003) and *Into the Blue* (2005) with Jessica Alba. But now you know he's got a secret in the closet.

The Monster Squad

★ ★

Critical Reception

"The Universal Monsters, or slightly mutated version of them, step off their respective cereal boxes and have an adventure with a bunch of kids. The Frankenstein Monster is lovable. Cross *The Goonies* with *The Munsters* and you basically produce this film. Nothing special, good for the kids."—William Latham, author, *Mary's Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Andre Gower (Sean); Robby Kiger (Patrick); Stephen Macht (Del); Duncan Regehr (Dracula); Mary Ellen Trainor (Emily); Leonardo Cimino (Scary German Guy); Jonathan Gries (Desperate Man); Stan Shaw (Detective Sapir); Tom Noonan (Frankenstein); Ryan Lambert (Rudy); Michael Faustino (Eugene); Lisa Fuller (Patrick's Sister); Jason Hervey (E.J.); Adam Carl (Derek); Brent Chalem (Horace); Ashley Bank (Phoebe); Carl Thibault (Wolf Man); Tom Woodruff Jr. (Gill Man); Michael MacKay (Mummy); Jack Gwillim (Van Helsing); David Proval (Pilot); Daryl Anderson (Co-Pilot).

CREW: A Peter Hyams production. **Casting:** Penny Perry. **Music:** Bruce Broughton. **Monsters created by:** Stan Winston. **Visual Effects:** Richard Edlund. **Film Editor:** James Mitchell. **Co-Producer:** Neil A. Machlis.

Production Designer: Albert Brenner. *Director of Photography:* Bradford May. *Executive Producers:* Peter Hyams, Bob Cohen, Keith Barish. *Produced by:* Jonathan A. Zimbert. *Written by:* Shane Black, Fred Dekker. *Directed by:* Fred Dekker. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

INCANTATION: “One hundred years before this story begins, it was a time of darkness in Transylvania. A time when Dr. Abraham Van Helsing and a small band of freedom fighters conspired to rid the world of vampires and monsters ... and to save mankind from the forces of eternal evil. They blew it.”—The opening card of Fred Dekker’s *The Monster Squad*.

SYNOPSIS: The arrival of Count Dracula (Regehr) in present-day suburban America coincides with the resurrection of the Mummy, the transformation of the Wolf Man, the ascent of the Gill Man from the swamp and even the electrical re-activation of the Frankenstein Monster. A group of smart-aleck kids, including a police detective’s (Macht) son (Gower), form a posse called the Monster Squad to stop these villains after acquiring the all-important diary of Dr. Van Helsing. With a help of a Scary German Guy (Cimino) to translate the journal, the kids determine they need a virgin to help them open a vortex in time and space to send the monsters to oblivion. But that’s easier said than done, as their choice of virgins, Phoebe (Bank), may not technically qualify.

COMMENTARY: Steven Spielberg, what have you wrought?

Is it possible to love Spielberg’s movies, and yet—at the same time—decry the impact they had on the film industry, and, in particular, the horror genre in the mid-to late 1980s? After all, it was in films like *E.T.* (1982) and *The Goonies* (1985) that precocious kids became all the rage and served as popular screen characters. And it was because of Spielberg (and Spielberg-sponsored) films such as *Gremlins* (1984) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1985) that the PG-13 rating was forged. That one-two punch was a recipe for disaster.

Kids + PG-13 = watered-down horror movies.

The Monster Squad fits that above-specified equation perfectly. It’s a precious horror movie that’s too cute by half. It stars a cadre of adorable wisecracking tykes, and substitutes homage (and an honest love for the genre) and impressive special effects for actual scares. It’s a losing formulation, especially since the special effects have aged ... and so has the corny humor.

Nobody doubts that director Fred Dekker loves and understands horror movies. His credentials shall not be questioned here. He includes in his script a funny discussion of the reasons why the Wolf Man had to wear pants in the 1940s Universal classics, displays posters for highly regarded films like *This Island Earth* (1955) on the Monster Squad's treehouse walls, and even features a gag about Dracula living at 666 Shadowbrook Road. It's abundantly clear that Dekker knows, appreciates and understands the genre.



Monsters assemble! From left to right: The Creature from the Black Lagoon, Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster, the Mummy and the Werewolf. From *The Monster Squad* (1987).

An important question to ask is, "Is that enough reason to make a movie?" It seemed that many "movie brat" directors in the 1980s seemed hellbent on recapturing their youths by making films that displayed their overwhelming love for the classics. It is the ultimate in fan boy indulgence.

Ultimately, what Dekker has forged here is nothing but a *Goonies*-esque adventure in which the fearsome and popular monsters of yesteryear (Dracula, The Mummy, The Wolf Man, Frankenstein's Monster and the Gill Man) are revealed as toothless props to be

knocked down by smart kids. There's no sense of menace, no indication that these creatures can "compete" with Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers or any of the other popular monsters of the 1980s. Instead, these characters are like campy relics, not a serious threat. Having a bunch of obnoxious kids defeat them so handily just reinforces that notion.

Does anyone really care to see the Frankenstein Monster's heart melted by a cute little girl? Or to witness him flying into a vortex with a Teddy bear for a moment of pathos? Does any horror fan *really* long to see the Wolf Man kicked in the "nards" (or balls) by a fat kid? And does anybody really need endless shots of children screaming at the top of their lungs, ostensibly as a substitute for humor? Also, why does the script demand that the kids constantly make fun of each other with hurtful terms like "faggot" and "homo"? Again, blame Steven Spielberg and terms like "penis breath."

Nor is *The Monster Squad*'s script very carefully wrought. The film takes pains to explain that Del's (Macht) marriage is on the rocks. Yet the adventure with Sean, Del's son, miraculously cures all the ills of the marriage. At the end of the day, the family reunites, yet Mother and Father have had not one substantive word about why they were fighting, or how their differences have been resolved. Then, adding insult to injury after this all-too-tidy wrap-up, the film ends with a terrible rap song about The Monster Squad.

The Lost Boys is a perfect example of a horror film that features obnoxious kids and references to comic books and old favorites yet remains scary, engaging and enjoyable for adults throughout. But, even if you're a fan of the Universal Horrors and a gentler age of horror movies, *The Monster Squad* won't bring back any good memories. Had Fred Dekker produced a serious-minded, slightly theatrical, black-and-white Gothic film shot on beautiful stage sets and called it *The Monster Squad*, that might have maintained some of the mystery and glory of these old friends. Instead—like everything else—the monsters in this film are played as jokes.

I'd give real money to see Duncan Regehr portray a serious version of Count Dracula. I just don't want to see a loud-mouthed kid slap a slice of garlic pizza on his cheek. That's just one indignity the regal count suffers in *The Monster Squad*, but it's more than enough for this reviewer. Some folks may quibble, "But it's a kid's movie, it's supposed to be silly!" If it's a kid's movie, then why the stupid jokes about virginity? Then why the naughty language? And besides, kids deserve good movies too.

Near Dark



Critical Reception

“*Near Dark* is remarkable—obviously a small genre movie but with more ideas, political ideas, than most big movies have. It can simply be a vampire movie or a Freudian horrorfest on ‘the family,’ and the AIDS epidemic ... The acting down the line is excellent.”—“One Bite Leads to Another in *Dark*,” *Sacramento Bee*, October 13, 1987, page B11.

“[A] well-acted, highly original country-and-western vampire movie ... The director, Kathryn Bigelow, gets solid, no-nonsense performances out of her entire cast, but especially from Henriksen, Pasdar ... and Joshua Miller...”—John Hartl, “Fire Lacks Spark, But *Near Dark* Is Quite a Sleeper,” *The Seattle Times*, December 6, 1987, page C5.

“The bar scene is a vampire set piece evoking not Bela Lugosi but Sam Peckinpah ... *Near Dark* breaks the old vampire movie rules, but vampire tradition is a mass of local variations. Indeed, *Near Dark* is as much a *Romeo and Juliet* dilemma as a vampire adventure ... [it is] suspenseful in an unusual way.”—Ted Mahar, “New Vampire Movie Breaks Ancient Rules...,” *The Oregonian*, December 16, 1987, page E04.

“The revamped vampire story remains a horror film but it regains its power to chill because of Bigelow’s care at creating a palpable relating around the fantastic events.”—Michael Healy, “Good Weekend to Pick Apart the Innards of Horror Flicks,” *Daily News of Los Angeles*, November 1, 1987, page L21.

“Kathryn Bigelow’s 1987 vampire film *Near Dark* was a victim of two lethal bites: careless marketing and critical oversight (more than enough to send it to an early grave in the video bone-yard). However, as everyone knows, it’s hard to keep a good bloodsucker down—*Near Dark* is now considered a high-watermark of ’80s horror cinema. To my mind, however, it’s much more than that. Quite possibly, it’s the most poetic, *anguished* vampire film since Carl Dreyer’s near-silent *Vampyr* (made 55 years before).

“A love story (and a deeply affecting one at that), *Near Dark* is basically about the difficulties of maintaining an intimate relationship

with a vampire—at least if one intends to remain mortal. A callow young man is bewitched by a lovely blonde wraith, and subsequently drawn into her ghoulish nuclear family. We're in Edgar Allan Poe Country, albeit updated and transposed to modern-day Texas. Hovering in a strange twilight between the living and the undead, the man struggles to return home to his biological kin, while his 'adopted family' tears up the countryside (along with numerous folks who get in the way) to reclaim his soul.

"Merely describing the 'plot' of *Near Dark* does a disservice to Bigelow's masterpiece—one comes away intoxicated by the eerie images and sound design. It's a ravishing, savage work of poetry, one that brings to mind not only classic vampire films of yore, but also dreamlike films of the supernatural, such as Harvey's *Carnival of Souls* and Cocteau's *Orpheus*."—Sam Shapiro, guest columnist, *Charlotte Observer*, film instructor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Adrian Pasdar (Caleb); Jenny Wright (Mae); Lance Henriksen (Jesse Hooker); Bill Paxton (Severen); Jenette Goldstein (Diamondback); Joshua Miller (Homer); Marcie Leeds (Sarah); Tim Thomerson (Loy); Kenny Call (Deputy Sheriff); Ed Corbett (Ticket Seller); Troy Evans (Plainclothes Officer); Bill Cross (Sheriff Eaker); Roger Aaron Brown (Cajun Truck Driver); Thomas Wagner (Bartender); Robert Winley (Patron in Bar); James Le Gros (Teenage Cowboy); Jan King (Waitress); Danny Kopel (Biker in Bar); Billy Beck (Motel Manager).

CREW: F/M Entertainment Presents a Feldman/Meeker Production of a Kathryn Bigelow Film. *Associate Producer:* Diane Nabatoff. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Costume Designer:* Joseph Porro. *Stunt Coordinator:* Everett Creach. *Film Editor:* Howard Smith. *Music:* Tangerine Dream. *Director of Photography:* Adam Greenberg. *Executive Producers:* Edward S. Feldman, Charles R. Meeker. *Co-Producer:* Eric Red. *Special Effects Makeup:* Gordon Smith. *Written by:* Eric Red, Kathryn Bigelow. *Produced by:* Steven-Charles Jaffe. *Directed by:* Kathryn Bigelow. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A restless young cowboy from Oklahoma named Caleb (Pasdar) falls in love with a strange girl named Mae (Wright) whom he met on a dark city street. After she bites him following a particular passionate kiss, he grows ill and attempts to return home to his farm. Mae's family, which includes Jesse (Henriksen), Diamondback (Goldstein), the psychotic Severen (Paxton), and a foul-mouthed child,

Homer (Miller), is actually a roving band of outlaws—and vampires to boot. By night, they kill humans for food. Caleb is reluctant to commit murder and instead continues to feed off the rapidly weakening Mae.

One night, Jesse insists that Caleb kill his prey, and takes the family to an out-of-the-way country bar for a violent night of blood sport. Jesse still resists killing, but proves his worth to the family when he helps them escape a siege by the police at daylight, which is fatal to the vampires.

COMMENTARY: “The night has its price” in the haunting and beautiful *Near Dark*, a visually resplendent vampire movie set in the American West during the age of AIDS. In Kathryn Bigelow’s masterpiece, a young man named Caleb (Pasdar) falls for the wrong woman, Jenny Wright’s Mae, and finds himself drawn into the fringe, twilight world of nomadic bloodsuckers, murderous outlaws who live off the land ... and local populations.

There’s much to admire in Bigelow’s fast-moving horror ode to gangster films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968), from the pulsing Tangerine Dream score to the cool, Southwestern neo-noir palette: a world of rain-soaked streets, half-empty bus stations depicted in flickering fluorescent light, and dark, dangerous predators on the prowl. Yet the film finds and maintains its most powerful and distinctive voice as a metaphor for the dangers of seeking (and finding) an exciting and sexual existence outside “normal” life.

Here, Caleb is a farmer from a close-knit family that lives in the small town of Fix, Oklahoma. He’s an innocent who’s never been to the big city, and the lure of the metropolis is powerful. In many cases, and in real life, when innocents like this leave home seeking exotic experience, they come to bad ends, whether it be AIDS, drug addiction, prostitution or vampirism.

The vampire myth has always been associated with blood, and in the age of AIDS the “vampire virus” takes on a new, deeper meaning. The disease of AIDS (or HIV) is carried in the blood, and can be transmitted in bodily fluids, and *Near Dark* thrives on such knowledge. When Caleb first spies Mae on a rainy street corner and feels drawn to her, we know he’s asking for trouble pursuing the streetwalker. As many prostitutes are infected with the AIDS virus—a nasty wake-up after a one-night stand—so is Mae infected with the blood disease of vampirism. Caleb and Mae share their first kiss, and already Mae draws blood from his neck. The scarlet blood lingers on her lips and *Near Dark*’s message is plain, warning against the dangerous passage

of fluids between strangers seeking sensual pleasures.



The Vampire gang of *Near Dark*, from left: Severen (Bill Paxton), Lance Henriksen (Jesse Hooker), Joshua Miller (Homer) and Jenette Goldstein (Diamondback).

Once infected, Caleb grows ill and the film takes care to depict him in terms one recognizes as fundamentally diseased. He's sweaty and pale, haggard and unkempt. Without even the money to return home, he could be a strung-out drug addict (as AIDS sufferers sometimes are, particularly intravenous drug users). Here, the film subtly notes that Caleb is in need of a fix: more blood to keep him healthy and beautiful. But—contrarily—he's also literally in need of Fix: the home town he left behind and the bosom of his caring family.

Near Dark's very first shot is a close-up gaze at a mosquito—another type of bloodsucker—squashed on a human arm as it draws its sustenance. This is the film's central motif and *Near Dark* views the vampires (at least this gang) as bloodsuckers draining society. However these predators—like the mosquito—tend to go unnoticed until they become a nuisance; they exist in twilight until swatted away or destroyed in the harsh light of the sun. The life of the vampires

depicted in *Near Dark* is not unlike the life of a mosquito at a swamp, existing in a kind of squalor, hopping from one hole in the wall to another, being forced to be opportunistic feeders. “I hate it when they ain’t been shaved,” Severen, one of the vampires complains after feeding on a fat redneck in an out-of-the-way dive. The choice of victims is clearly not the romantic ideal, the tradition of the European vampire in cape and collar sweeping in to romantically drain the life force of a damsel wearing white. Quite the opposite, these parasites must take what they can get and operate on the periphery of society. Caleb comes into their sights because he’s a country boy alone, out of his element, seeking something “foreign” and dangerous to him: love with a siren; love with a streetwalker.

When Caleb finally does feed, it’s in the frenzy of the skag, the addict. He eats greedily at Mae’s wrist as a heartbeat is heard on the soundtrack. He is one of the vampires now, and when asked what they will do, Mae replies “anything we want. Until the end of time.” That strikes me as a particularly purposeless existence, like a drug high spanning the centuries. Man is granted immortality, and this is how he spends it? In the end, both Caleb and Mae opt out of this retirement plan and, through the miracle of a drug transfusion, cleanse themselves of the virus that has made them sick and addicted. They do so, explicitly, to see the Sun again, but also because even in their vampire haze, they know their lifestyle is unhealthy and, worse, endless.

Near Dark references the Western genre in its final showdown on a dark street, and some of Caleb’s family dynamic (replete with horses and cowboy hats). The film also alludes to *Bonnie and Clyde* in its depiction of a lifestyle wherein life consists of murder, running, covering your tracks and spending sleepy days at places like the Godspeed Motel. Like the anti-heroes of that Arthur Penn film, the vampires awaken here from their slumber to an old-fashioned shoot-out with police surrounding their bungalow. Only these vampires, unlike Clyde Barrow, must content with “fuckin’ daylight,” an added hazard.

Near Dark is clever in the way it pits one healthy “normal” family against an unhealthy vampire clan. Particularly touching—and unsavory—is the story of Homer, the adolescent in the bunch who is forever a man trapped in a boy’s body. The dream is one familiar to Peter Pan: never growing up. But the reality is terrifying; perpetual “youth” at the expense of maturity ... and sex. In terms of horror, *Near Dark* reaches its creative apex during a sustained set piece at a bar as the outlaw vampires make trouble with the local clientele. Goldstein,

playing the matriarch of the clan, Diamondback, slits the throat of a waitress and lets it spill out directly into her beer stein, a gross image. And Bill Paxton's Severen slices a bartender's neck with razor-sharp boot spurs. The sequence is unbelievably gory and still packs visceral impact. This scene, more than any other, reveals the down side of being a vampire. Murder—the spilling of blood—is not pretty.

For such a beautifully shot and moody film, one brimming with atmospheric desert and location shots, *Near Dark* is oddly unromantic in theme, or rather, de-romanticized. The vampires are dirty, sand-blasted vermin, hangers-on dwelling at the edge of civilization, and vampirism is treated as a virus. Immortality is seen as an endless, unpleasant trap, and a life of murder and running is depicted as a less than happy one. The restlessness Caleb feels at the beginning of the film, the urge to find adventure, is quickly sated when he see what life outside his “safe” world entails. In charting this path, and in depicting the world of vampirism (and AIDS), *Near Dark* is one of the 1980s’ finest meditations on a very old monster. The primary vampires here, played with resolute skill by a troika from the movie *Aliens* (Jenette Goldstein, Lance Herniksen and Bill Paxton), haven’t seen the Sun in so long that they forget what it means to be human. To face one’s ending, and start each new day with the hope of a fresh sunrise. That’s why it’s easy, perhaps, for them to kill. They don’t want to die, but they’ve also forgotten the things that make life worth living.

New York Ripper

★ ½

Critical Reception

“A clumsy who-dun-it that involves a woman-hating maniac, slashing and thrashing his way through the streets and back alleys of Manhattan. The film is gory and dispiriting, but mostly tedious and taxing on the nerves. *New York Ripper* sadly grandstands director Lucio Fulci at his most impolitic and sleazy.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jack Hedley (Lt. Fred Williams); Almanta Keller(Fay); Howard Ross (Mickey); Andrew Painter (Peter); Alexandra delli Colli (Jane); Paolo Malco (Dr. Davis); Cinzia de Ponti (Rosie); Laurence Welles (Dr. Lodge); Zora Kerowa (Stripper); Paul Guskin (Desk Sergeant).

CREW: Fabrizio de Angelis presents a Lucio Fulci film. *Production Design and Costumes:* Massimo Lentini. *Film Editor:* Vincenzo Tomassi. *Music:* Francesio de Masi. *Director of Photography:* Luigi Kuveiller. *Producers:* Fulvia film, s.r.l—Rome. *Written by:* Gianfranco Clerici, Lucio Fulci. *Stunt Coordinator:* Nazzareno Cardinali. *Directed by:* Lucio Fulci. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Lt. Williams (Hedley) of the New York Police Department is hot on the trail of a murdering psychopath who is cutting up the city's women. The killer—who makes strange quacking sounds—butchers a girl named Rosie (de Ponti) on a ferry, and then a sex show star (Kerowa) in her changing room. The killer pursues another woman off a subway, but she survives the attack. The identity of the killer goes back to a sick young girl in hospital, and someone who is protecting her with a vengeance.

COMMENTARY: If a madman likes to quack on the telephone to his prospective victims, is he a slasher or just a (lame) duck? That's one question viewers might ask themselves during a viewing of this Lucio Fulci *giallo*, the distasteful *New York Ripper*. Even by the Fulci standard for the genre, this is a weak horror film, and that's really saying something, given the quality of *The Beyond*.

Made in 1982, but not released in America until 1987—long after the slasher craze had died down—*New York Ripper* involves the police hunt for a voyeuristic murderer who is missing two fingers, and “likes to be noticed.” The killer harbors an obsession with women who sin, and murders them in a most gory, graphic fashion (with a razor blade).

In close-up, he slices off one victim's exposed nipple, for instance. The Ripper also does something inappropriate with a glass bottle and another female victim. His examples of “good, efficient butchery” get the madman noticed by the cops, but they're really just symbols of useless authority and unable to stop a lunatic with a “yen for slashing up young ladies.”

This is an unpleasant and blunt movie, one filled with red herrings and a confusing conclusion. On the plus side, it is also authentically sleazy. It captures the seedy vibe of New York's urban underside quite dramatically.

Early on, for example, there's a scene set at a live sex show which miraculously appears genuine (and which also features female masturbation amongst the audience). And later there's some real

tension when a character named Jane tries to escape from the bed of a man she presumes is the Ripper. She has just slept with him and the radio by the bedside announces that the murderer is missing two fingers ... just like her lover. Jane gets out of the room in due haste but, in a weak echo of *Dressed to Kill* (1980), is stabbed and murdered before she can exit the building.

As a director, Fulci lacks taste, and subtlety too, but that's okay, because frequently he's aided and abetted by composer Fabio Frizzi and cinematographer Sergio Salvati. They often help salvage his incoherent direction, but both are MIA here. And truthfully, sometimes a lack of taste and subtlety is refreshing, even amusing, and that's certainly the case in the fun *Zombie* (1979). Still, Fulci's Persian flaw is that he'll never use a fly swatter when a hammer is available. For instance, early in *New York Ripper*, a woman named Rosie gets brutally attacked, and the film pauses to reveal the blade rending her flesh as her guts bubble copiously out of her body.

Then, when her corpse is found, she's depicted gloriously splayed out with her breasts awkwardly exposed ... like they were carefully arranged that way immediately before the shot was captured. It's not so much that this is an immoral approach or anything like that, just that it reeks of blatant and ham-handed exploitation. Who gets off on seeing the ample breasts of a woman who's been slashed and gutted?

Only Lucio knew for sure.

Nightflyers

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Catherine Mary Stewart (Miranda); Michael Praed (Royd); John Standing (D'Branin); Lisa Blount (Audrey); Glenn Withrow (Keeler); James Avery (Daryl); Helen Udy (Lilly); Annabel Brooks (Eliza); Michael Des Barres (John Winderman).

CREW: *Presented by:* The Vista Organization Ltd. *Casting:* Nina Axelrod. *Music:* Doug Timm. *Special Visual Effects:* Fantasy Film Effects. *Effects Supervisor:* Gene Warren, Jr. *Pyrotechnics:* Joe Viskocil. *Nightflyer miniature designed by:* John Eaves. *Special Vehicles and Props:* Robert Short Productions. *Special Makeup and Mechanical Effects:* Robert Short. *Costume Design:* Brad R. Loman. *Supervising Film Editor:* Jay Cassidy. *Film Editor:* Tom Siiter. *Art Director:* Mike Bingham.

Production Design: John Muto. *Director of Photography:* Shelly Johnson. *Screenplay by:* Herb Jaffe. *Produced by:* Robert Jaffe. *Stunt Coordinator:* Bob Yerkes. *Directed by:* T.C. Blake. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At the Avalon Space Port in the twenty-first century, a diverse team of researchers, including two telepathic individuals (Des Barres & Brooks), a cryptologist (Udy), a biologist (Withrow) and Miranda (Stewart), board the ancient freighter *Nightflyer* on a mission to communicate with an enigmatic life form called the Valkryn, whom the team leader believes creates stars in its cosmic wake.

The captain of the *Nightflyer*, Royd (Praed), is the only crew member who appears to the team, and he's a hologram. This makes the clever Miranda suspicious about the ship, which is run by a seemingly omnipotent computer. When she and Royd grow close emotionally, the ship seems to retaliate. Before long, team members are being killed in brutal fashion.

COMMENTARY: If a filmmaker were to mix the homicidal computer HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* with Norman Bates' creepy mother in *Psycho*, chances are that director would end up with a bizarre (but fascinating) story like the one featured in *Nightflyers*, an ambitious, compelling film that ultimately fails to impress due to a plethora of dodgy, inferior special effects. *Nightflyers* is jam-packed with good, even novel, cinematic twists and turns, but at least one important plot thread is left dangling at the conclusion, and the "future" envisioned by the film appears clunky and inelegant, instead of sleek and streamlined.

To further the *Psycho* analogy, young Royd (Michael Praed) represents Norman Bates, a lonely, isolated, even retiring young figure held in thrall to an overbearing mother. Only in this case, Royd's mother isn't human, but has transferred her soul into the ship's computer. Consequently, she is now more dangerous than ever ... able to control the atmosphere and environmental controls of the ship and thus holding the lives of all boarders in her computerized hands. She's also—as Norman imagines his mother to be—a highly jealous mistress.

Nightflyers reveals that Adarra, Praed's mom, first transferred her soul into the machine because the "level twenty telepath" hated the "dirt, stench" and "bacteria of people and planets." This hatred for humanity is not that far, thematically, from Mrs. Bates' seemingly fundamentalist views on sex (which she deemed dirty; or which Norman believed she deemed dirty).

The ship *Nightflyer* is thus a sort of an interplanetary Bates Motel, one where lodgers are murdered in horrible fashion. And Mom is even stored in the basement after a fashion, locked away in the computer compartment.

Also, in both films, it is the young man's burgeoning romantic relationship with a woman, either Janet Leigh or Catherine Mary Stewart, that threatens the "Mom" personality and turns it homicidal. Interestingly, in both *Psycho* and *Nightflyers*, the evil Mother isn't really alive in a genuine, Euclidian sense. In *Psycho*, she's merely a taunting voice in Norman's head, an alternate personality. In *Nightflyers*, Adarra is a computer construct, not a flesh-and-blood entity ... but still quite mad.

Like Kubrick's HAL, Royd's mother boasts a searing red, watchful eye that observes all, and indeed, many shots in the film reveal that red, Cylon eye viewing Miranda either exercising or performing gymnastic routines. As for the murders in *Nightflyers*, they tend to be far more elaborate than regular knife-kills (as appear in *Psycho*), simply because there are more ways to kill a person on a spaceship, where every life function is monitored, tweaked and regulated by machine. Thus, there's a depressurization scene, caused by Mother's decision to open an airlock. There's also an amazingly gory scene involving laser surgery, reminiscent of *Logan's Run* (1976), only more graphic. A laser slices off the arm of one character, then proceeds to sever his head at the jaw line, leaving a smoldering corpse.

In other words, this is one Momma you don't want to mess with.

Nightflyers could be remade in the 21st century with the same script (even the same actors, really) and emerge as a much better, much richer film, in part because special effects technology has improved so much since 1987, when this film was released. Certainly, everybody did their best to create a fine film, but the special effects just don't hold up to scrutiny, and that weakens *Nightflyers* since the film is entirely dependent on them, from the depiction of ship interiors to manifestations of a computer mind, to adventurous EVAs.

Also, the Valkryn is the ultimate red herring. The crew never gets to reach this cosmic curiosity, never finds out what it is, or even if it's alive, and that result tends to feel like a nasty gimmick. Of course, one could play devil's advocate here and carry through with the *Psycho* metaphor to its logical conclusion. One must remember that Hitchcock's film also opened with a red herring plot, the search for a woman (Leigh) who has stolen cash from her job. The money is never

really important, intrinsically, to what finally occurs at the Bates Motel in *Psycho*, and thus neither is the Valkryn important to the climax of *Nightflyers*. It's just a misdirection, but for those weaned on *Star Trek* or the like who want to learn more about an alien life form, it's irritating to be denied closure.

This writer has a soft spot for 1980s outer space movies that don't actually involve rampaging, drooling aliens as the primary threat, and so films like *Nightflyers* and *Galaxy of Terror* are highly cherished. *Nightflyers* is not a great film, perhaps not even a good one, but it remains ambitious, bold, and so very different from many of the *Alien* rip-off movies released at the time. Also, Catherine Mary Stewart, replete with butch hair-cut and oversized 1980s-style sun glasses, is always a lead worth watching.

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“[T]he latest in a series which speaks about both sex and class—about what has been buried by a suburban American community. Along with films like *Halloween* it is both about and addressed to ... adolescent kids—functioning as a B-side to *The Breakfast Club* or *Pretty in Pink* teen-problem movies.”—Judith Williamson, *New Statesman*, December 11, 1987, page 24.

“Nightmares derive their power precisely from the fact that the mind is pitted against itself, caught in a dreadful inner world from which it cannot escape. Here the nightmare is merely a frame for all the standard tricks of a high-tech fear film, and the concentration of sophisticated special effects simply does not scare us.”—James Gardner, *New Leader*, March 23, 1987, page 19.

“Heather Langenkamp returns along with Wes Craven’s pen and gives us one of the better sequels in the series. Freddy had not yet become the king of one-liners and the series would stumble for the most part for the rest of its run, and this film offered us some essentially likeable characters (and a few funny celebrity cameos) that manage to drum up some sympathy before Freddy does his thing. Some of the plot leaves a little to be desired (and the term ‘bastard son of a hundred maniacs’—please!), but this captured some of the spirit of Craven’s original film, and if nothing more, is a fun film.”—William Latham,

author of *Mary's Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Heather Langenkamp (Nancy Thompson); Patricia Arquette (Kristen Parker); Larry Fishburne (Max); Priscilla Pointer (Dr. Elizabeth Simms); Craig Wasson (Dr. Neill Gordon); Brooke Bundy (Elaine Parker); Bradley Gregg (Phillip); Rodney Eastman (Joey); Ira Heiden (Will); Nan Martin (Nun/Amanda Krueger); Jennifer Rubin (Taryn); Ken Sagoes (Kincaid); Penelope Sudrow (Jennifer); John Saxon (Thompson); Dick Cavett (Himself); Zsa Zsa Gabor (Herself); Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger); Clayton Landey (Lorenzo); Kristen Clayton (Little Girl); Sally Piper, Rozlyn Surrell (Nurses); Stacey Alden (Marcie); Jack Shea (Priest in Cemetery); Paul Kent (Dr. Carver).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Heron Communications Inc., & Smart Egg Pictures Present a Robert Shaye production. *Casting:* Annette Benson. *Art Directors:* Mick and C.J. Strawn. *Production Manager:* Gerald T. Olson. *First Assistant Director:* Dennis Maguire. *Second Assistant Director:* Robin Randal Oliver. *Mechanical Special Effects by:* Peter Chesney, Image Engineering, Inc. *Krueger Makeup and Effects by:* Kevin Yagher. *Special Makeup Effects Sequences by:* Greg Cannom and Mark Shostrom. *Special Visual Effects:* Dreamquest Images. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Hoyt Yeatman. *Film Editors:* Terry Stokes, Chuck Weiss. *Associate Producer:* Niki Marvin. *Director of Photography:* Roy H. Wagner. *Executive Producers:* Wes Craven, Stephen Diener. *Music:* Angelo Badalamaneti. *Line Producer:* Rachel Talalay. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Gerald T. Olson. *Co-Producer:* Sara Risher. *Screenplay by:* Wes Craven, Bruce Wagner, Chuck Russell, Frank Darabont. *Story by:* Wes Craven, Bruce Wagner. *Produced by:* Robert Shaye. *Stunt Coordinator:* Rick Barker. *Directed by:* Chuck Russell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

INCANTATION: “This is where it began. Purgatory fashioned by the hands of men.”—Amanda Krueger introduces the origin of Freddy in an insane asylum, noting that the dream demon is the “bastard son of a hundred maniacs.”

SYNOPSIS: Another Elm Street teen Kristen (Arquette), is haunted by dream demon Freddy Krueger (Englund). Her mother (Bundy) thinks Kristen is suicidal and has her committed to the nearby Westin Hills Sanitarium. There, Kristen joins a group of teens suffering from the same “group delusion” of a boogeyman and being treated by the compassionate Dr. Neill (Wasson).

Nancy Thompson (Langenkamp), a pioneer in dream research and former Krueger nemesis, comes to believe that the children are all facing a real danger—Freddy—rather than a hallucination, and prescribes them a dangerous dream suppressant called Hypnoci. Then she convinces Neill that they must work on each teen’s “dream powers”; and only by combining them can they destroy the evil Krueger.

Kristen has the ability to pull others into her dreams, Kincaid (Sagoes) possesses incredible strength, Taryn (Rubin) is beautiful “and bad,” and Will (Heiden) is a wizard-master, courtesy of his fascination with Dungeons & Dragons. While Nancy helps the kids, Neill learns from a nun—the spirit of Freddy’s mother, Amanda Krueger (Martin)—that Freddy is the “bastard son of a hundred maniacs” and that he can only be stopped by burying his bones in hallowed ground. While Nancy, Kristen and the teen “dream warriors” go into a dream to rescue one of their own, Joey (Eastman) from Freddy’s boiler room, Neill and former detective Thompson (Saxon) search for Freddy’s bones in an auto salvage junkyard.

COMMENTARY: The dream universe is back front and center during the action in *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors*, and Wes Craven’s dream demon Freddy Krueger’s control of that realm has grown more dynamic and more elaborate in the rubber-reality sequel. It’s a special effects showcase with a good cast that includes *Elm Street* ingénue Heather Langenkamp, John Saxon, newcomer Patricia Arquette and Laurence Fishburne. As a bonus, there’s even an interlude that explains Freddy Krueger’s origins as the product of rape, “the bastard son of a hundred maniacs.” Yet, despite all this, *Dream Warriors* is the demarcation point in the Krueger saga where the horror diminishes, humor is augmented, effects take over and all attempts at believability goes out the window. *Dream Warriors* is a roller coaster ride—and enjoyable on those terms—but it’s really just a collection of set pieces, each one highlighting a different but fascinating special effects technique. Thus, the film feels segmented and choppy instead of a coherent whole, with each minor character coming in to do a “bit” and Freddy serving more as a ringmaster than an authentic bogeyman.

Still, *Dream Warriors* genuflects to the concepts and themes of the original, whereas *Freddy’s Revenge* was a complete departure from the first film’s aesthetic. Here, the idea that the next generation will pay for the excesses of this one is resurrected in full. “We’re paying for their sins,” one of the characters realizes, perhaps too late. Indeed, just like the generation will be paying for deficit spending, tax cuts for

the rich and government entitlements the country can't afford. Still, this movie doesn't linger on this terrain, in part because it's too interested in getting to the next effects sequence (and subsequent *bon mot* from Mr. Krueger).

In terms of its special effects and imagination, is more brawny than either of its two predecessors. Bathroom faucets sprout bony hands and come to life. TV sets unfurl robotic arms, and there are swift, unexpected location transitions between shots. For instance, Kristen is sound asleep in her bedroom when the camera retracts to reveal the front yard of Freddy's house instead of the expected confines of the bedroom. Later, Kristen closes her hospital room door only to find herself slamming the front door of Freddy's abode. As though in shock, the camera rockets backwards, and the suggestion (enhanced by the visuals) is that no matter how hard this young woman tries to escape Freddy, his nightmare world pulls her back in.

Even time itself repeats in the film, near the climax, when *Dream Warrior*'s opening passage is regurgitated with a light modification, one which includes a deadly and funny intrusion by Freddy Krueger. Early in the film, there's a jaw-dropping sequence in which Freddy transforms into a giant worm that devours a prone Arquette, and this is clearly a vision that the original film (budgeted at a meager \$1.8 million) couldn't afford.

Still, the special effects sequences are a two-edged sword. Instead of acting as the scary, personal vision of a frightened and determined teen, Nancy Thompson, Freddy's world here is pure phantasmagoria lensed in excellent light (so the special effects can be seen), and a result is that the fantasy landscape replaces terror and genuine scare. Freddy is seen so often that he is no longer scary. No more is he society's guilty secret, skulking in the boiler room. Instead, he's a demonic lizard king, a god: Loki the trickster, brimming with puns and witticisms. Rather than trapping teens in his particular nightmare (the boiler room where he died), Freddy torments the ciphers based on their one-line psychological character hooks. Phillip builds marionettes, so Freddy turns him into one. Jennifer wants to be a television actress, so Freddy jams her into a set. Joey likes hot supermodels, so Freddy lures him to his doom with a foxy nurse. *Ad nauseam, ad infinitum*. The protagonists are developed only to the extent that a single character detail can be manipulated by Freddy to kill them.

Although *Dream Warriors* made more money than the previous two *Elm Streets*, it is the film thus far in the series that is most difficult to

take seriously. To wit, all the adults behave stupidly, and refuse to believe the evidence of their eyes. When each of the teens dies at Freddy's hand (or rather, glove) the adults conclude that the murders were suicides. That would not be a problem if the deaths were plausible. Yet consider the death of Jennifer the aspiring actress; Max, the orderly, finds her jammed into a TV set. The television is attached to a wall in the rec room that is about eight feet off the floor. To jump into a TV that high with such force that she would break the tube and electrocute herself, Jennifer would have to take a long running start, jump from a trampoline and aim (head first!) like a guided missile at the TV set. There is no way that anyone with even a modicum of intelligence could believe that her very odd demise was a suicide. There is not even a table or chair near her corpse that she might have used as a springboard.



Krueger ... *Freddy Krueger* (Robert Englund) plays dress-up for *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987).

At another juncture, Freddy carves into Joey's chest the words "Come and get him, bitch." This is amusing and macabre, and similar in

execution to the moment in *The Exorcist* when a phrase “help me” appears on Linda Blair’s stomach, but here the scene occurs in a fully manned hospital while the character is hovering between life and death in a coma. Not a single nurse or physician thinks that this scar (carved by the finger knives) is anything out of the ordinary? Did Joey cut himself up like that while unconscious?

Also, when Phillip is transformed into a marionette and guided to his death by puppet master Krueger, Phillip de-materializes on one side of the door, and re-materializes on the other, as though Scotty beamed him there. How is this possible? Freddy now has the power to disintegrate and re-assemble the matter of a dream victim? Again, this is something that just doesn’t make sense in terms of the dream rules established by Craven in the original film.

Lastly, in the real world, as Don Thompson and Dr. Neill Gordon attempt to lay Freddy’s “unquiet spirit” to rest because it is an “abomination to God and to man,” how does Freddy leap into reality to inhabit his bones? How does he manage to make all the car headlights in the automobile junkyard come to life? The thing about Freddy is not that he can harm people in their waking hours, but that he controls the world of sleep and dreams (those “little slices of death”), and everybody has to sleep. What’s scary is that we all must go to his world; not the notion of Freddy attacking in ours, but this film gets that wrong too.

Despite its flaws, much of the film is very funny, particular the cameos by Zsa Zsa Gabor and Dick Cavett. Again, however, does it really belong in a Freddy film? The jokiness and inconsistency of the admittedly spectacular set pieces in the film are very much indicative of New Line’s MTV approach to the franchise. Freddy Krueger serves as a brand of evil v.j., entering music video-like dreams and dispatching children with a joke and a wink. The film seems tailor-made for a kid weaned on music videos, which makes the film a stark contrast to Craven’s terrifying and thoughtful original. That film demanded to be watched from the first frame until the ambiguous conclusion, and can still be interpreted in many ways. It could be read as a dream, given the conclusion, for instance. *Dream Warriors*, by comparison, feels rather empty, especially now that the special effects have aged and it’s no longer state-of-the-art.

Still, even the most cynical viewer can’t deny the frisson generated by the moment when Nancy first encounters Freddy in Kristen’s dream. It makes the blood run cold as the Freddy worm recognizes Thompson and, in a sort of growl-howl, mutters “You.” The monster’s recognition

of his nemesis is frightening, and the look crossing Langenkamp's face registers pure terror. In moments such as this, the meaningful cat-and-mouse relationship between Krueger and victim is reasserted well.

And truthfully, this isn't a bad movie. It's a respectable entry in the series, and would have made a decent ending to the saga, had producers left well enough alone. After all, the movie wraps with Nancy dead and Freddy's bones interred in consecrated ground. What was left to cover? The sequels would follow the line of this film, that Freddy's victims possess "dream powers" which let them combat him. In some sense, this is a positive message to transmit to the film's intended audience (teens): The power to defeat evil is within you, if only you believe it is.

Indeed, the vast majority of Freddy fans prefer this film to the uncomfortable (homoerotic) and subtext-heavy *Freddy's Revenge*, and it's easy to detect why that's the case. In every way, *Dream Warriors* is more spectacular, and funnier to boot. And it also returns beloved cast members to the fold. Yet it also happens to be less challenging than its immediate predecessor, and ultimately not nearly as scary as the two earlier films.

The transformation of Freddy Krueger from terrifying boogeyman to pop-culture icon is nearly complete.

Opera (a.k.a. *Terror at the Opera*) ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"While his visual styling is at its peak in *Opera*, Argento has unfortunately forgotten the disturbing substance needed to give the picture's dazzling scale meaning. As a result, the film becomes like its prima donna, able to pitch her voice to beautiful heights, but failing to move viewers with her swan song."—Daniel Schweiger, "Dario Argento at his blood-soaked apex unjustly consigned to the shelf by Orion," *Cinesfantastique*, Volume 19, Number 4, May 1989, page 52.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Cristina Marsillach (Betty); Ian Charleson (Marco); Urbano Barberini (Inspector Santini); Daria Nicolodi (Mira); Carolina Cataldi Tussoni (Giulia); Antonella Vitale (Marion); William McNamara

(Stefano); Barbara Cupisti (Signora Albertini); Antonio Juorio (Baddini); Carola Stanaro (Alma's Mother); Francese Cassola (Alma); Bjorn Hammer (Cop).

CREW: Written, produced and directed by: Dario Argento. Screenplay: Dario Argento, Franco Ferrini. Original idea by: Dario Argento. Director of Photography: Ronnie Taylor. Production Designer: David E. Bassan. Art Director: Gianmaurizio Fercioni. Costume Designer: Francesca Lia Morandini. Film Editor: Franco Fraticelli. Production Supervisors: Allesandro Calosci, Verzna Baldeo. Executive Producers: Ferdinando Caputo. MPAA Rating: Unrated. Running time: 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When the diva of a new version of Verdi's opera *Macbeth* is injured in a car crash, her young and inexperienced understudy Betty (Marillach) makes her debut at the Regio Theatre. Betty is a smash hit with the critics, but strange things—perhaps associated with the *Macbeth* curse—begin to happen to the company.

A stagehand is slain during Betty's first performance. Later, the killer murders her boyfriend and forces Betty to watch the whole horrible event by taping needles just below her eyes to keep them open. With the assistance of the play's director, Marco (Charleson), Betty attempts to discover the identity of the killer. She is protected in her apartment by the watchful Inspector Santini (Barberini), but the killer manages to get to her anyway. A neighbor, a little girl named Alma (Cassola), helps Betty escape through a network of vents in her apartment building.

Finally, Marco sets a trap for the killer, realizing that the ravens he features in *Macbeth* have an incredible memory and will recall the killer from a previous visit. The ravens are let loose during a performance and proceed to finger the killer. This leads to a fire, the apparent death of the murderer ... and then his bloody return.

COMMENTARY: Dario Argento's 1987 giallo, *Opera*, was reportedly beset by a number of crises (the *Macbeth* curse?) during its making, and the director himself called production of the film "unpleasant." Behind-the-scenes turmoil aside, however, this film from the director of such classics as *Suspiria* (1976) is unfailingly accomplished in terms of its gorgeous visuals and camera prowess. Furthermore, *Opera* is downright disgusting in its over-the-top, gory imagery.

More interesting, perhaps, to students of Argento, is the deep cynicism about filmmaking that permeates the film, just beneath the slasher-style story. It suggests a director fed up with bullshit.

In *Opera*, Argento's ever-fluid camera roves and prowls the Regio opera house hallways like some kind of mad dog, consequently revealing the scope and size of the opera house, and its magnificent structure. The same camera moves also indicate the presence of a dark force at work, a killer with a grudge. Meanwhile, hard rock music accompanies many murders, and the final scene looks like a bizarre, evil version of *The Sound of Music*'s opening shot. It's that kind of movie.

The most impressively staged sequence arrives near the conclusion when ravens are released into the theater in a desperate attempt to identify the killer in the audience. It's an audacious plot twist, and some of the swooping and diving camerawork featured here is breathtaking and extraordinary. No one can doubt Argento, the visualist, that's for certain.

And then there's the gore. *Opera* features an unforgettable *coup de grâce*, a moment when a bullet goes through a character's eye in plain sight. The bullet is seen in slow-motion traveling through the gun chamber before a side view of the projectile penetrating the eye and skull.

Another gory moment finds Betty tied to a post by the killer, with rows of needles taped below her eyes so she must watch "the show" unfolding before her. Then, the killer slaughters her boyfriend using a knife. When the boyfriend shouts because he's been stabbed in the neck, Argento's camera captures an effective shot of the knife protruding into his open mouth (actually *inside* his mouth), above his tongue. It's simultaneously inventive and nasty, but nobody excels at this kind of material like Argento.

All of this gore and violence comes at the service of a story that seems to be Argento's fed-up statement about the universe of filmmaking: and *Opera* is dotted with little, cynical jokes about show business. "I think it's unwise to use a movie as a guide to reality," says the director at one point, speaking directly to critics, perhaps, who complain about the violence in films like this one.

Also, the same director is thoughtfully advised, "Go back to horror, forget opera," a recommendation that Argento must have heard himself on more than one occasion.

Argento also gets in his potshots against actresses who behave like divas (Vanessa Redgrave, anyone?). The lead actress in Verdi's opera complains about the director of the production because she doesn't

approve of his movie-style direction on stage, which includes rear projection, laser beams, live ravens, etc. She pays for her unkind remarks by getting struck by a car.

Finally, it's hard to deny that *Opera* is all about *watching*, and the interaction between the film percipient's eye and film itself. Eyes like Betty's are forced open to witness horrible acts, eyes are blown out by bullet, and then, finally, a raven chews out one of the killer's eyes. All of this violence seems directed at the audience that demands more bread and circuses, more grue for the masses, when maybe someone like Dario Argento would prefer to move on to other things.

Even the director doesn't get out of *Opera* alive, and maybe that's Argento's ultimate statement about moviemaking. It's hard to tell, frankly, because in a film of powerful, unforgettable imagery, the script (co-authored by Argento) relies on the tricks of the slasher paradigm, including red herrings, a crime in the past, and facile psychological explanations for certain events and motives. This isn't Argento's best film by a long shot, and it feels like the director is really blowing off steam.

Predator



Critical Reception

"I've always loved McTiernan's movies—he is a master of action that actually manages to engage your intelligence—and the last act of this flick is simply spectacular. It's before the flick lets Arnold go *mano a mano* with the bad-ass alien soldier that it drags and hesitates and can't find its direction. But a great ending has saved many an otherwise mediocre movie, and that's what happens here."—MaryAnn Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic.

"More an action film than anything else, this is one of Arnold's better outings. An eager supporting cast made this work. Alan Silvestri offers one of his best scores, with much of the energy of his work in the *Back to the Future* films. John McTiernan was flexing his muscles here in preparation for the original *Die Hard*, probably his best action film. The creature effects work really well, Arnold's one-liners are fun, and what's most surprising is how this is really three films—a war film, a suspense film, and then an action film. The titular monster has a personality all its own, and the film seemed to fit together nicely in

places where it shouldn't—normally a hodgepodge of genres in the same film falls apart (or did in the days before Quentin Tarantino).”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

“A great action flick, despite the obligatory ‘hunted one by one’ set-up. The use of special effects really helps the audience understand, if not empathize with, the alien hunter.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Dutch Schaefer); Carl Weathers (Dillon); Elpidia Carrillo (Anna); Bill Duke (Mac); Jesse Ventura (Blain); Sonny Landham (Billy); Richard Chaves (Pancho); R.G. Armstrong (General Phillips); Kevin Peter Hall (Predator); Shane Black (Hawkins).

CREW: 20th Century Fox Presents a Gordon-Silver-Davis Production, a John McTiernan Film. *Executive Producers:* Laurence Pereira, Jim Thomas. *Music:* Alan Silvestri. *Special Visual Effects:* R/Greenberg. *Creature created by:* Stan Winston. *Casting:* Jackie Birch. *Film Editor:* John F. Link, Mark Helfrich. *Production Design:* John Vallone. *Written by:* Jim and John Thomas. *Producers:* Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver, John Davis. *Directed by:* John McTiernan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

INCANTATION: “If it bleeds, we can kill it.”—Schaefer’s logical deduction in *Predator* (1987).

SYNOPSIS: An elite squad of American soldiers, led by the morally upright Dutch Schaefer (Schwarzenegger), is dropped into a Central American jungle to rescue a cabinet minister and his aide from foreign guerrillas. Once on the ground, Schaefer and his men learn that their superior, Dillon (Weathers), has tricked them and they have been used to destroy a village, stop a Russian plot, and prevent an invasion of a neighboring country.

Schaefer is disturbed, but more concerned about the discovery of six American soldiers in the jungle, skinned alive and hanging upside down from a tree. Soon, Schaefer’s men are being hunted by an invisible alien predator with superior firepower and extra-terrestrial technology. A local captive, Anna (Carrillo), reports that her village has a long history of dealing with this strange hunter, who only visits the jungle in the hottest years. And this is a very hot year. With his men murdered and his survival on the line, Schaefer goes primitive to destroy the predator.

COMMENTARY: John McTiernan's intense action-horror film, *Predator*—the story of an extra-terrestrial “demon who makes trophies of man”—is actually a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The film presents another patriotic American action film (replete with a battle against Russian agents and Central American Communists), but is something else entirely. The film looks like it continues the process of militarizing horror in the 1980s, and indeed it does so. However, much like the highly militaristic *Aliens* (often disparagingly called *Rambolina* by critics and the press), *Predator* is actually a film that pushes back against the American myth of military invincibility.

Predator deposits America’s finest soldiers into a Central American jungle. These are big, sturdy men like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura and Sonny Landham. These guys are so big they have muscles on their muscles. Beyond that, they are exquisitely armed with the latest destructive hardware, including an impressive (and gigantic) Gatling gun, which fires hundreds of rounds per minute. They seemingly have little to worry about, and this impression is cemented in the scene preceding the drop. Two American helicopters sweep into the jungle to the tune of Little Richard’s “Long Tall Sally,” a giddy rock ‘n’ roll tune that indicates the mission is all fun and games. On board the copter, one soldier, Hawkins, begins his stream of colorful “big pussy” jokes, again an indication that the men’s minds are not on the action—which they are confident of—but on camaraderie and fun.

Once in the jungle, the men rattle off macho dialogue so stilted it almost seems laughable. But there is a point; their bravado and confidence, some might say arrogance, knows no bounds. “Payback time!” “Time to let Old Painless out of the bag!” “I ain’t got time to bleed!” All these lines reassure the audience (and the soldiers) of their esprit de corps. In the battle against the Central American guerrillas, more *bon mots* are heard. “Stick around!” Arnold quips after throwing a knife into an opponent. “Knock, knock,” he teases, bursting into a room and blowing away two higher-ups.

The attack on the village, a major set piece, evokes memories of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). The American squad decimates it with ease, re-writing the history of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the defeat of American forces in Vietnam. Here, as in *Rambo*, American might obliterates all comers.

Yet, again, this is a trick. The set piece, which many saw as merely imitative of *Rambo*, actually is used to dramatic purpose. Like the Little Richard tune in the helicopter or the macho banter in the jungle preceding the assault, the methodical, carefully wrought attack on the

village establishes American superiority so that John McTiernan can then undercut it.



The hunter takes a frightening stance in John McTiernan's collaboration with Arnold Schwarzenegger, *Predator* (1987).

After this attack, it is hard to imagine Jesse Ventura, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sonny Landham, Bill Duke or Carl Weathers afraid of anyone or anything. They're the "ultimate warriors" (as the ad copy for the film indicated). But, they're about to get knocked down several

pegs by the Predator, and this would not be nearly so effective a turnaround in the film had their creds as invincible, American avengers not been established.

At this point *Predator* becomes a truly fascinating, even illuminating film about war, and how one's fortunes can change suddenly and dramatically. Big men with big guns become no match for an alien hunter. Billy, an Indian tracker who can "read the jungle," is no match. Blaine (Jesse Ventura, a wrestler) who carries a Gatling gun, is no match. Dillon—Apollo Creed in the *Rocky* series—is no match. Even Schwarzenegger—Conan/The Terminator/Commando—is not even much of a challenge for the Predator at first, and nearly gets his hat handed to him in each of the several conflicts with the alien interloper.

Suddenly, the giddy fun of the helicopter ride, the banter, and even the adrenaline-thumping patriotism of the attack on the jungle all seem very distant. These American death-dealers, for the first time, come to fear death themselves. "It's no way for a soldier to die," Mac (Bill Duke) says at one point, looking at the soldiers skinned alive. This is a fate the soldiers fear more than anything, and as a result, American superiority is turned upside down. These soldiers become the quarry.

Nowhere is this transition made more obvious than in Mac's final moments. He has lost his best friend, Blaine, and determines to go after the Predator. He does so because he's brave, but he's also terrified, and he begins to sing, in strange, halting fashion, "Long Tall Sally," the Little Richard song that was blared on the helicopter's speakers. Suddenly, this isn't all fun and games anymore. The soldiers' lives are genuinely at stake because of a predator that looks at them with even less regard than they looked upon the guerrillas they massacred in the village. Turnabout, one might add, is fair play.

Predator finally comes down to a conflict between two species, the Predator and Man, but to fight this battle, Arnold Schwarzenegger's character, Dutch, must go native. To hide from the alien's heat vision, he slathers himself with gray mud. He forsakes his hi-tech weaponry (which ultimately has no impact on the Predator) and trades it for what Dillon terms "Boy Scout bullshit," meaning natural booby traps, torches, and a bow and arrow.

The message here is that, again, war is not a political game, a fun contest of one-upsmanship and a grab for territory (one to be punctuated by the strains of rock music), but rather a basic battle of

survival. How one utilizes the battlefield—and one's own instincts—is the ultimate test. This time, Arnold proves his superiority not by blazing Gatling gun (like in the camp) or brute strength (in the way he lifts a vehicle with his bare hands and sends it careening into an enemy hut) but rather by his examination of his enemy, and his careful understanding of the Predator's vulnerability.

In this case, that weakness is how the Predator sees—his infra-red vision. By accident almost, Dutch has found a way to turn that strength into a disadvantage. Through Dutch's shrewd understanding and clever planning—not big guns carried by big men—the Predator is defeated.

This wolf-in-sheep's-clothing aspect of *Predator* is secondary to style, and the efficient, beautiful manner in which John McTiernan shot the film. The director's camera tracks and moves almost constantly, keeping each composition alive and breathing, and photographing the dense jungle with a three-dimensionality that allows the unexpected and the surprising to pop up in the foreground when least expected. The decision to render Predator vision infra-red is a variation of that 1980s cliché, the P.O.V. stalk shot. It re-invigorates that commonly used canard, and is actually scary in this situation. The technique reaches its pinnacle in a sequence involving the Predator's own clawed hand reaching into the frame to pick up a dead scorpion. The scorpion—dying—goes black in the Predator's “living” hand, and so the image is of death within death, a Predator dead—a trophy—in the hand of another predator.

Part of what makes *Predator* such a splendid viewing experience is the jungle itself, a remarkable setting of overgrown fronds, waterfalls, fallen logs and mountains. Indeed, the forest is the battlefield of the film, and so it is a terrain McTiernan's camera probes with cleverness. For instance, in the middle of the film, Hawkins has been killed, and Dutch orders a search. There's a shot of Schwarzenegger patrolling the forest, looking around for signs of his missing comrade, gun at the ready.

Instead of following Schwarzenegger, however, McTiernan's camera just begins to travel upwards—up and up—to reveal Hawkins' body gutted and hanging from a high tree branch. His blood is dripping down on the fronds and leaves below, unnoticed by Dutch. This shot reveals the Predator's superior use of the local environment, the fact that he is literally playing on another level altogether. He can access the “high ground” in a way the humans can't.

There's also a suspenseful, *Alien*-worthy sequence in which Dutch, Anna, Dillon and Pancho resolve to capture the Predator with a net, and try to draw him into the open. How the plan unfolds—and unravels—and how McTiernan uses silence on the soundtrack and extreme close-ups of the actors, is textbook suspense building, and it works beautifully.

Another fine sequence involves Dutch's final preparations for one-on-one battle with the Predator. As he becomes a caveman almost literally, a montage of preparations is created. A series of "suiting-up" shots follow which might sound like a *de rigueur* thing for any action film, but again, McTiernan shoots it beautifully. During each shot of this montage, his camera begins with movement, coming from behind a tree, revealing Dutch in action, and then moving behind another object. Then a new shot, also moving, begins. It captures the passage of time, makes Dutch's preparations clear, and has a momentum and sense of tension as the battle draws near.

Also, *Predator* features a great nemesis who has become an icon of horror. First off, kudos to McTiernan for not revealing this alien hunter in all his glory until late in the film, which keeps suspense and tension high. And when the Predator does appear in the flesh from behind his personal cloaking device, he doesn't disappoint. The Stan Winston-created creature is a beautifully designed, ferocious opponent, down to his arcane-looking medical kit and weaponry.

Much is made in the film of the Predator's curiosity, and his "learning curve" in expressing himself in the English language. Short phrases like "Over here" and "Any time," take on new, frightening meaning once the Predator has learned them, and he uses them like a human would use a duck call to draw in his prey. Everything about the Predator feels just right, from his infra-red vision, to his shoulder-mounted laser weapon (with three laser pointers), to his sack of skulls and a troublesome self-destruct device. There's a great moment when the audience sees—from a distance—the alien's brutality. With one mottled hand, he rips out Sonny's entire spinal column and skull.

It's tempting to look at *Predator* as *Rambo* meets *Alien*, and perhaps that was how the film was conceived. But there's 1980s thematic push-back here, as a group of soldiers having a jolly time killing Central American rebels, comes face to face with what death really and truly is. The film starts out like *Rambo*, it's true, but then undercuts that aesthetic for a suspenseful battle for survival that acknowledges that big men with big guns don't necessarily always have an advantage.

LEGACY: A giant hit in the summer of 1987, *Predator* spawned a sequel in 1990, *Predator 2*. Starring Danny Glover as a hardened Los Angeles cop in the future year of 1997, that film pitted the Predator against heavily armed drug dealers as well as the U.S. government. In 2004, the Predator returned to the silver screen once more for a pitched battle (in Antarctica) with another popular extra-terrestrial in *AVP* or *Alien vs. Predator*.

Prince of Darkness



Critical Reception

“Carpenter’s worst film ... inept and barely coherent. The ambitious but confused script evokes Godel and Schrodinger in the first few minutes, explains precognition as tachyon messages from the future, solemnly broods on indeterminacy, and the spiritual inferences to be drawn from quantum mechanics.”—John Clute and Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, St. Martin’s Press (1995) page 962.

“[B]adly paced, badly acted and minus the occasional flourishes which have made [Carpenter] past mechanical efforts seem better than they actually are.”—Alan Jones, *Starburst* #10, July 1988, pages 30–31.

“One of Carpenter’s finest films, his homage to Nigel Kneale and Kneale’s Quatermass series from British TV and subsequent film adaptations, *Prince of Darkness* has been unfairly criticized for being too much of some things and not enough of others. What it offers is Carpenter’s latest western, changing the assault on the precinct into a church, and the faceless villain this time is old Scratch himself, but Carpenter’s moves it along with such adrenaline, with such clarity of vision, that it shows one of the last really confident films Carpenter made—he knew what he was doing here. His music is relentless, the comic relief doesn’t alleviate the tension (always a good sign in a Carpenter film), the cast is totally believable, and if you’re a Quatermass buff, it gets everything right in how you tell this kind of story, where science is trying to deal with something supernatural. Carpenter would still make some good films after this one, but this was the last time he really seemed to have his magic working for him.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Donald Pleasence (Priest); Jameson Parker (Brian); Victor Wong (Birack); Lisa Blount (Catherine); Dennis Dun (Walter); Susan Blanchard (Kelly); Anne Howard (Susan); Ann Yen (Lisa); Ken Wright (Lomax); Dirk Blocker (Mullins); Jessie Lawrence Ferguson (Calder); Peter Jason (Dr. Leahy); Robert Grasmere (Wyndham); Thom Bray (Etchinson); Joanna Merlin (Bug Lady); Alice Cooper (Street Schizo); Betty Ramey (Nun); Jesse Ferguson (Dark Figure).

CREW: Universal, an MCA Company, Alive Films Presents a Larry Franco Production of a John Carpenter film. *Casting:* Linda Francis. *Film Editor:* Steve Mirkovich. *Production Design:* Daniel Lomino. *Director of Photography:* Gary B. Kibbe. *Music:* John Carpenter, in association with: Ala Howarth. *Executive Producers:* Shep Gordon, Andrew Blay. *Produced by:* Larry J. Franco. *Written by:* Martin Quatermass. *Directed by:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

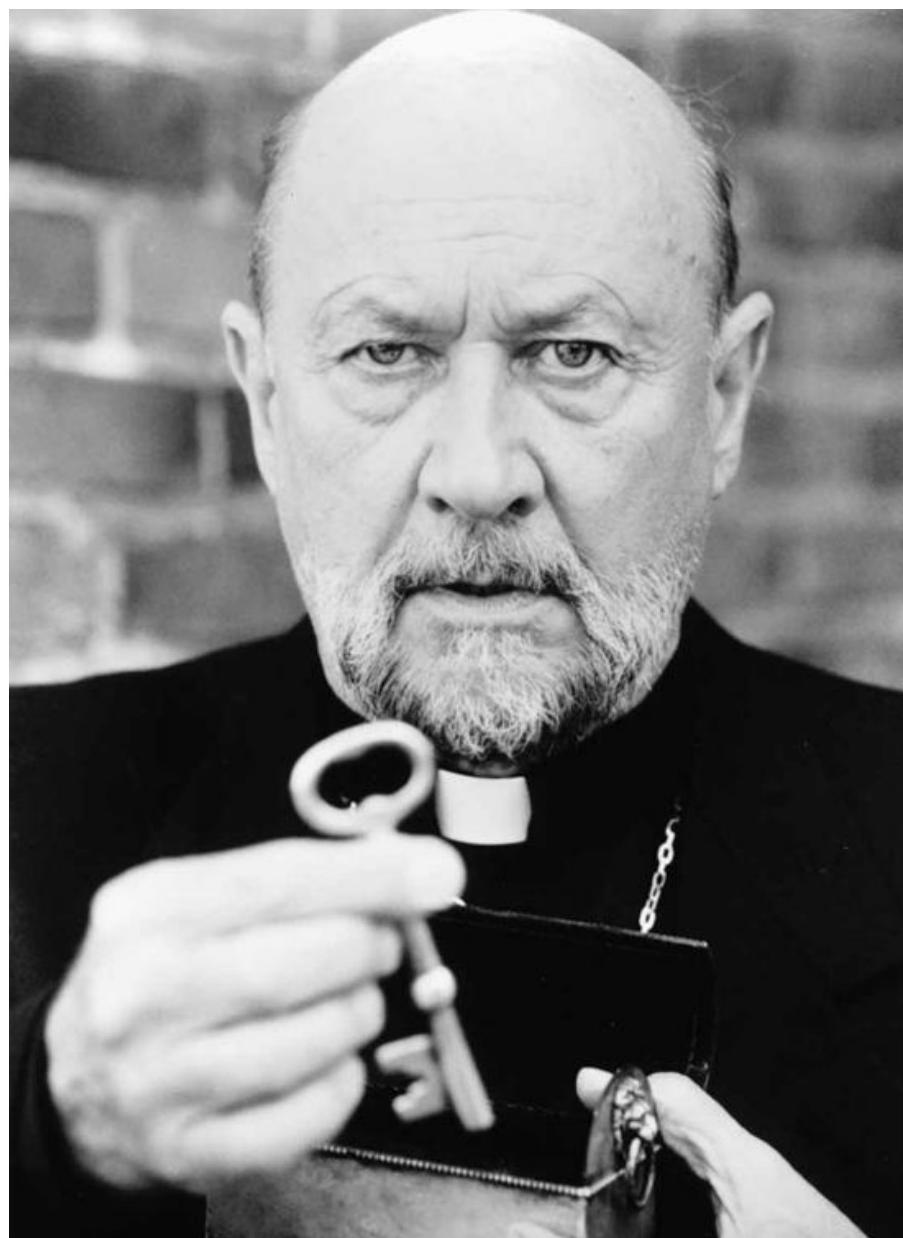
SYNOPSIS: An elderly priest in a secret Catholic sect known as the Brotherhood of Sleep, expires during the night while clutching a small box on his chest. This box contains the key to an unholy terror, for locked away in the basement of a rundown Los Angeles Church called St. Godard's is an ancient canister of volatile, swirling fluid. The Catholic Church has known about it since the beginning, but this liquid is, in fact, Pure Evil.

Hoping to understand the nature of this enemy, a Catholic priest (Pleasence); Professor Birack (Wong), an expert of physics; and a class of brilliant graduate students set up shop in the old church and undertake a study of the canister and the liquid, as well as a Latin text that details the life form's apparently extraterrestrial origins.

Over a long night, the street bums around the church are roused to evil life by the monstrous fluid and surround the building. Inside, the research is compromised as the liquid is passed from one team member to the other, turning each student and scientist in a zombie. More genuinely disturbing, a young woman named Kelly (Blanchard) seems to be undergoing some kind of transformation, becoming the flesh-and-blood host to the fluid. When this transformation is complete, Kelly proceeds to beckon to the anti-God, a monstrous "father" dwelling in the realm of anti-matter. If she should succeed, mankind is doomed. Preventing this necessitates self-sacrifice on the part of one of the students.

COMMENTARY: Although *Prince of Darkness* received poisonous notices when it was released in October of 1987, it remains one of

John Carpenter's unique, thematically rich films. It seeks to establish a hierarchy in the universe in some rather fascinating ways. Utilizing the notion that for every particle of matter there is an equal and opposite particle of anti-matter, the script intuits the existence of something truly frightening, not just a devil, but an anti-God, a universal mind dedicated to evil. And the scary thought is that we might live in the universe of the anti-God, not God!



A Catholic priest (Donald Pleasence) possesses the key to an ancient secret in John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*.

Carpenter has long been a fan of writer Nigel Kneale and the Hammer Quatermass film trilogy (*The Creeping Unknown* [1955], *Enemy from Space* [1957] and *Five Million Years to Earth* [1968]). His *Prince of Darkness* screenplay was written under the *nom de plume* Martin Quatermass, indicating its status as homage. In keeping with that tribute, *Prince of Darkness* walks the same line of thought as those older films, re-defining religion or myth through the instrumentation of modern scientific study.

Consider *Five Million Years to Earth*, in which an alien spaceship is found beneath a subway station at Hobb's End, London. Aboard it are the corpses of aliens who arrived on Earth millions of years earlier but who apparently formed the gestalt of human legends about demons and devils.

In *Prince of Darkness* the situation is roughly analogous: Evil is found in an unlikely locale (a church basement), the evil is extra-terrestrial in origin, and it proves the foundation of Christian mythology about Satan. In *Prince of Darkness*, computer translations of ancient texts and quadratic equations define the religious concept of evil in believable, measurable terms. As Bryan Dietrich writes in his Essay "*Prince of Darkness/Prince of Light*":

Prince of Darkness presents us ... with a direct metaphor for the paradigm shift taking place in the real world of science ... The role of the Church is passed on to the only institution it sees capable of honestly defining meaning in this day and age, to science.²⁴

This metaphor is reinforced by Carpenter's choice in shots. As Pleasence first views St. Godard, the camera provide an establishing shot from beyond an iron gate. Between the vertical slats of this gate, a cross can be seen jutting up from the roof. Yet above the church is another gate slat, this one horizontal. In other words, the cross (representing religion) is boxed from above and on both sides. It is confined by its inability to diagnose evil.

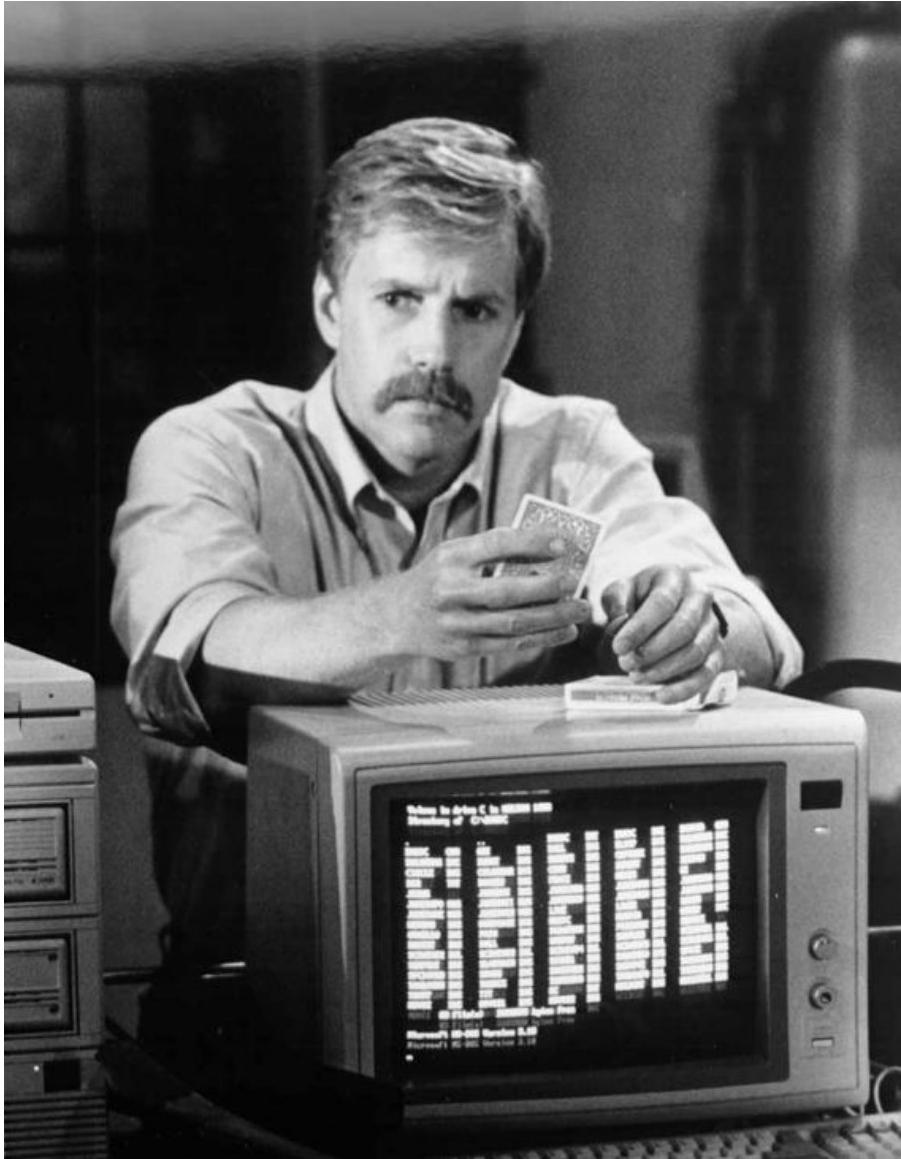
In its attempts to define science as the heir to religion, *Prince of Darkness* celebrates the Kneale aesthetic, yet there is more going on

here. Though science diagnoses the problem via computers, radiology, carbon-dating, differential equations and the like, it is human nature that actually resolves the problem of the ascent of Evil. Catherine Danforth (Blount) sacrifices her life to save all the world (like Jesus Christ) and the message is that though humans may rely on technology it is still up to them—emotional miscues, intimacy disconnections and personality flaws aside—to wield it responsibly and effectively.

Prince of Darkness may prove of most interest, however, not in terms of its homage to Kneale or guardedly optimistic stance about human nature, but rather in its depiction of evil as a kind of plague. It's clearly an allegory for the AIDS virus, which was receiving intense public scrutiny in the year 1987. People were so afraid of contracting this disease that even the traditionally hedonistic James Bond films were eschewing rampant promiscuity in favor of restrained monogamy in efforts such as *The Living Daylights*.

Appropriately, in *Prince of Darkness*, evil is transmitted through bodily fluids, just like AIDS. Susan contaminates Calder by kissing him and forcing the sinister fluid down his throat. Likewise, she “converts” the translator Lisa in a sexually charged sequence. As Lisa reclines on her bed face up, Susan mounts her, climbing into the dominant position, straddling her. She then ejaculates the devil liquid into Lisa’s protesting, open mouth.

This AIDS allegory is not particularly subtle but it infuses *Prince of Darkness* with another layer of meaning and relevance within its historical context. Indeed, a review might take the case further. Throughout the film, Walter (Dun) is defined repeatedly in homosexual terms. When he sees the Satanic bruise on Kelly’s arm he notes that at age twelve he broke out too, from “homosexual panic.” At another point, he comments that he is missing a date with a beautiful trial attorney and Brian responds, “What’s his name?” Lastly, where is poor Walter trapped during the film’s finale? In a closet, of course! When he digs his way out, pursued by the women who want to share his bodily fluids, Walter is literally forced out of the closet, racing from a heterosexual experience. The point here is merely that many people in 1987 blamed homosexuals for the AIDS epidemic (wrongly), so it is appropriate that *Prince of Darkness* should also include a veiled reference to homosexuality.



Jameson Parker ponders cards and computers in *Prince of Darkness*.

It is not difficult to detect that most of the "evil" contact in *Prince of Darkness* is of the same-sex variety. Susan infects Lisa; Susan and Lisa infect Kelly; Leahy and Calder both go after Brian. The one instance when a woman infects a man (Susan to Calder) the attack represents another sexual taboo: interracial coupling. By contrast, when Brian

and Catherine make love early in the picture, there is no evil attached because it is a heterosexual coupling, a behavior which was once deemed “safe.”

Prince of Darkness is a disturbing, complex film that captures a prime fear of the 1980s, AIDS. It also ask some rather large questions concerning human nature. It is one of Carpenter’s scariest films (and least-liked pictures).

Rawhead Rex

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Dukes (Howard Hollenbeck); Kelly Piper (Elaine Hollenbeck); Niall Tolbin (Reverend Coot); Ronan Wilmot (Declan O’Brien); Niall O’Brien (Inspector Gissing); Hugh O’Conor (Robbie Hollenbeck); Barry Lynch (Andy); Cora Lunny (Minty Hollenbeck); Heinrich Von Schollendorf (Rawhead Rex); Donal McCann (Tom Garron); Eleanor Feely (Jenny Nicholson); Gladys Sheehan (Ena Benedict); Madelyn Erskine (Alice Gibson); Gerry Walsh (Dennis McHugh); Noel O’Donovan (Mitch Harney).

CREW: Alpine Pictures Presents a Green Man Production. *Casting:* Nuala Moiselle, Michael McLean, Diane Dimeo. *Director of Photography:* John Metcalfe. *Creature Effects:* Peter Little. *Stunt Coordinator:* Peter Brayham. *Art Director:* Len Hunting Ford. *Music:* Colin Towns. *Supervising Film Editor:* Andy Horvitch. *Screenplay by:* Clive Barker. *Executive Producers:* Al Burgess, Paul Gwynn. *Producers:* Kevin Attew, Don Hawkins. *Directed by:* George Pavlou. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I don’t believe in the Devil. But something started the rumor.”—A funny line in *Rawhead Rex*.

SYNOPSIS: In rural Ireland, a farmer’s attempt to remove a strange, ancient totem from his field results in disaster and the release of a frightening demonic beast, Rawhead Rex (Von Schollendorf). The demon kills a farmer and then attacks his pregnant wife, even as Howard Hollenbeck (Dukes), a writer looking into pre-Christian sacred sites, arrives in town with his family to study the local church and its unique stained-glass windows. Rex’s spree of terror continues as the demon decapitates a local teenager, Andy (Lynch), and brings out the authorities in force.

When Robbie Hollenbeck (O'Conor), Howard's son, is murdered by Rawhead Rex, Howard becomes obsessed with the demon. The secret to stopping the hell spawn appears to rest with one of the windows in Reverend Coot's (Tolbin) church, an illustration of the demon and an inscription indicating that the only thing it fears is that which it can never be. Although Reverend Coot has been "baptized" by Rawhead Rex and now serves it, Hollenbeck faces the beast alone, realizing that the only icon that can stop the beast is somewhere inside the church's unusual altar. But, even if he finds it, will Howard be able to brandish the icon effectively against the towering, murderous creature from Hell?

COMMENTARY: Boasting a screenplay by master of horror Clive Barker, *Rawhead Rex* is a not-bad (but not very good) monster-on-the-loose movie sabotaged by weak special effects and undone by a truly ridiculous demon costume. It's funny to consider that a really bad monster suit could single-handedly ruin an entire movie, but here that's precisely what occurs. Much good work is undercut by that damn demon.

Nonetheless, the director of the film, George Pavlou, possesses a nice flair for composition, and he sets up several wonderful shots to their best effect. The most effective sequence occurs as young Andy and Katrina head out in the woods at night behind their trailer park to make out, but run afoul of the monster instead.

There's a terrific shot of the duo fleeing through the woods, camera in hot pursuit. Uniquely, the moving camera is positioned at a low angle, aiming up at the skyline. Thus, throughout the chase, one can detect the weird, gnarled tree tops as well as the runners. This fast-moving chase is not only well-orchestrated, but the sight of the odd, looming tree branches evoke the notion of a twisted fairy tale.

Later, another eerie composition finds a creepy scarecrow overlooking a wide, isolated field. A little girl must head out into this field for an ill-timed potty break, and the audience fears immediately for the tyke's safety. But the director (and screenwriter) have misdirected the viewers; instead the demon goes after a different child. Again, the moment is accomplished adroitly, and the movie is even a little daring. A little boy, the hero's son gets murdered; it's the rare horror movie that allows children to be placed in mortal jeopardy.

Rawhead Rex also boasts a sense of humor and an interesting premise. On the latter front, the movie explores the idea of a pre-Christian horror returning to the land it once dominated. This idea feels like a

mating of Lovecraft and Quatermass aesthetics.

Even more to the point, what horror aficionado could fail to appreciate—at least a little—a film in which a big, fat demon who resembles a rock ’n’ roller mated with a Klingon baptizes his devoted acolyte by urinating all over him? And it’s not just a little urine either.

Yet for every moment that *Rawhead Rex* gets right, there’s another one that gets sabotaged by bad execution or that risible monster costume. For instance, early in the film’s action, the demon attacks a rural farmhouse, killing the farmer and going after his pregnant wife. This should be a terribly harrowing and disconcerting sequence, but alas, the creature just doesn’t appear scary and so terror is never adequately generated.

Worse, since the attack occurs in broad daylight, the audience is permitted to make out every detail of the crappy prosthetics. A better director would have staged the scene during blackest night to obscure the beast, or utilized a combination of different techniques (including the P.O.V. stalk shot) to prevent the audience from getting a full-on, lengthy gander at the fake-looking monster.

Another moment that should have been scary but isn’t involves a young lady at the trailer park as she is grabbed by the demon. As the monster lunges for her, this comely victim’s shirt conveniently breaks away and fully exposes her breasts. The reveal as staged here is a little too easy, a little too convenient. The victim appears to be wearing a shirt designed just for this very purpose. Which is convenient, I guess, and saves time for *Rawhead*.

Rawhead Rex’s climax fails to impress too. The scene is set in a cemetery and punctuated by a cheesy laser show that looks like test footage left over from Michael Mann’s *The Keep* (1983). Blue laser beams ricochet around grave stones as the big ol’ demon meets his match in something he can never be: a woman with the power to “create.”

Although the notion that the power of creation is the direct nemesis to the power of destruction might prove fascinating, it is presented here as a virtual afterthought.

So many aspects of *Rawhead Rex* are worthy of praise. At the beginning, for instance, when a farmer unwisely removes a “seal” keeping the demon in the ground, the film crosscuts to churchgoers singing a hymn, and shouting “hallelujah.” These moments of

opposition perfectly set up the film's debate about new and old religions, and are artfully achieved and edited. The rural settings are also quite beautiful. But just when one starts to admire the picture, that monster lumbers on screen—full frame, in close-up—and all is lost. It's like the movie, not just Rawhead himself, decided to urinate on the viewer.

Return of the Living Dead 2

★ ½

Critical Reception

“[It] fails to recapture the fun, frenetic energy of O'Bannon's original ... The horror-comedy keeps a fast pace but offers nothing that the first movie didn't already do better.”—Peter Dendle. *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*, McFarland and Company, 2000, page 144.

“Utter poop. You get the best two cast members from the first film, and this is what you do with them? This joins *Big Top Pee Wee* in the ‘biggest disappointing sequels of the 1980s’ department.”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Karen (Ed); Thom Mathews (Joey); Dana Ashbrook (Tom Essex); Marsha Dietlein (Lucy); Suzanne Snyder (Brenda); Philip Bruns (Doc); Michael Kenworthy (Jesse); Thor Van Lingen (Billy); Don Maxwell (Billy's Dad); Sally Smyth (Billy's Mom); Jason Hogan (Johnny); Jonathan Terry (Colonel); Mitch Pileggi (Sarge).

CREW: Lorimar Motion Pictures Presents a Greenfox Production. *Casting:* Shari Rhodes. *Music:* David Chackler for Sounds of Film, Ltd., J. Peter Robinson. *Film Editor:* Charles Bornstein. *Director of Photography:* Robert Elswit. *Special Makeup Created by:* Kenny Myers. *Executive Producer:* Eugene Cashman. *Co-Producer:* William S. Gilmore. *Stunt Coordinator:* Gary Davis. *Produced by:* Tom Fox. *Written and Directed by:* Ken Wiederhorn. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A canister of the zombie “revivification” chemical 2-4-5 Trioxin falls from the back of a military transport and ends up in the sewer drain near a cemetery and new suburban sprawl. There, a bully named Billy (Van Lingen) torments comic-book fan Jesse (Kenworthy), but himself becomes exposed to the chemical when the canister is

opened. The chemical wafts across the cemetery, bringing the dead back to life in search of “brains” to eat, just as grave robbers Joey (Mathews) and Ed (Karen) are doing their thing.

After the military have quarantined the town, only a few people, including Jesse, his sister Lucy (Dietlein), cable repairman Tom Essex (Ashbrook) and a few other survivors remain. After hiding in a hospital for a time, the small group heads for an electric plant, luring the zombies there with fresh brains.

COMMENTARY: Ken Wiederhorn’s follow-up to the 1985 cult classic *Return of the Living Dead* is indeed a fall from greatness. With its roaring punk rock soundtrack and sex & drug zombies (like fetching Linnea Quigley), the original film was a pulsating shock to the senses. Apparently aimed at children, the sequel is utterly toothless, with no edge, and more importantly, no feeling of nihilism. The first film ended with protagonists and zombies alike being nuked by the U.S. government; this one culminates with the zombies defeated by electrocution.

Return of the Living Dead 2 suffers from a terminal case of Steven Spielberg-itis. In a brazen attempt to capture the pre-adolescent crowd, young Michael Kenworthy is made the star, and so audiences must suffer through scenes with schoolyard bullies, bicycle chases and the like. And it’s the smart kid, of course, who figures out the answer to all of the problems ... just like if he were starring in *E.T.* If the zombies weren’t already out of their graves, they’d be spinning in them.

Everything about *Return of the Living Dead* has been made “younger” and more mainstream. Even the look of the zombies is more comic-bookish and “fantasy”-oriented rather than scary. The make-ups are less-nuanced, but more colorful ... but not terribly frightening. Even worse, the zombies themselves are treated as funny creatures with silly walks and silly faces.

Unwisely, *Return of the Living Dead 2* also attempts to re-capture the anarchic, comedic spirit of Dan O’Bannon’s first film by casting James Karen and Thom Matthews as mischievous cohorts again. They’re playing different characters this time around, but they are put through the same paces as in the original. They’re exposed to the zombie gas, they die, and they turn into zombies. Matthews even has a girlfriend whose brains he wants to eat in this one too! Insultingly, much of the dialogue is stuff we’ve already heard. “Watch your tongue, boy, if you like this job!” shouts Karen. “Like this job?” Mathews shoots back. It’s

like their greatest hits, all over again.

Now, I've seen "rerun" footage masquerading as character flashbacks in other 1980s horror movies, notably *Boogeyman II* and *Silent Night, Deadly Night 2*, but this is the first time I've seen repeat scenes actually re-shot as ostensibly new material.

Unable to generate any humor or surprises from the rerun material, *Return of the Living Dead 2* eventually degenerates into a din of screaming, hysterical characters. This is a concerted attempt to recreate the carefully hewn feelings of panic from the original, but scene upon scene in the sequel simply involves a multitude of characters screaming at each other at the top of their lungs. This nails-on-chalkboard hysteria wears out its welcome quickly. The scenes are just loud and unfunny. Karen and Matthews are great, but they shouldn't have been cast if the screenwriter couldn't think of something new for them to do.

To give the devil his due, there is one very amusing moment near the end of *Return of the Living Dead Part 2*. It's a long shot of the zombie masses being electrocuted. Suddenly, a zombie dressed as Michael Jackson (from *Thriller*) jumps into the frame and wriggles with the deadly voltage as though he's break-dancing. That's an inspired little joke, and more inventive than anything else in the film.

Thom Mathews' character describes best the flaws inherent in this sequel: "It's like we've been here before. You. Me. Them." That's the problem, sir. That's the problem.

Slumber Party Massacre 2



Cast and Crew

CAST: Crystal Bernard (Courtney Bates); Kimberly McArthur (Amy); Juliette Cummins (Sheila); Patrick Lowe (Matt); Heidi Kozak (Sally); Joel Hoffman (T.J.); Scott Westmoreland (Jeff); Jennifer Rhodes (Mrs. Bates); Cynthia Eilbacher (Valerie Bates); Michael Delano (Officer Krueger); Hamilton Mitchell (Officer Voorhees); Atanas Ilitch (The Driller Killer); Marshall La Plante (Car Driver); Don Daniel (Mr. Damn Kids).

CREW: *Presented by:* Concorde. *Casting:* Kevin Alber, Bruce Boll. *Music:* Richard Cox. *Production Design:* John Eng. *Special Makeup Effects:*

James Cummins. *Director of Photography*: Thomas L. Callaway. *Film Editor*: William Flicker. *Producers*: Deborah Brock, Don Daniel. *Written and Directed by*: Deborah Brock. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 75 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Rock and roll never dies, baby!”—The new driller killer, a hyperactive Elvis-type played by Atanas Ilitch, quips in *Slumber Party Massacre 2*.

SYNOPSIS: Courtney (Bernard), Valerie’s sister and a survivor of Russ Thorn’s slumber party massacre in Venice, California, is tormented by nightmares of that bloody rampage. Still, she decides to attend her first slumber party with her three-person girl band and a new boyfriend, Matt (Lowe), at a condo in Desert Springs. On the road, Courtney dreams of a demonic rock ‘n’ roll star (Ilitch) who murders Valerie (Eilbacher), now inside an asylum, with an electric guitar-turned-power drill. Courtney continues to hallucinate about the leather-clad musician-murderer all weekend, from a bloody bubble bath to a deranged chicken breast in the fridge. Then, when the girls in the band start to vanish, Courtney fears her nightmares are coming true.

COMMENTARY: *Slumber Party Massacre 2*, an inferior sequel to a perfectly adequate early 1980s slasher film, can’t decide if it wants to be an extended rock video, a sex comedy, or a rubber-reality horror flick. “It’s the ultimate slumber party weekend!” one character enthuses, but don’t get your hopes up.

In the late 1980s, production values in horror movies went right down the toilet because of the home video revolution and direct-to-video releases, and *Slumber Party Massacre 2* is an example of this downturn. It’s filmed like a TV show (the frame is a square, not a rectangle), and the setting is a deserted condominium ... probably a cheap rental for the production company. The director, Deborah Brock, has no idea how to stage sequences, and there are several scenes in which the young actors (who all appear to be in their twenties, even though they’re supposed to be high school students) directly address the camera, rather than each other. This is just one amateurish touch among many.

Another failing is the film’s inability to sustain a continuity with its predecessor. Here, Courtney and Valerie both return from the first film, as do several clips of Russ Thorn, but the actresses essaying these roles are new. Worse, as if to make the film likable to horror fans, the characters have all been named for genre icons. Now Courtney is

Courtney Bates, named after Norman Bates. Later, Officers Krueger and Voorhees show up ... nudge, nudge. Rather than making a film that horror fans would actually like, this film merely refers to horror films that fans liked. It's a new alchemy, and a shitty one.

Of all the characters, perhaps the most interesting is the new Driller Killer. His weapon, a guitar-turned-drill, is inventive, and the film has clever fun with his post-killing *bon mots*, which are all related to the rock world. When his drill malfunctions, the killer says, "I can't get no satisfaction." When the killer is burned by a torch, he urges, "Come on baby, light my fire." When the killer appears in a backseat to drill Jeff, he says, "This is dedicated to the one I love." This is moderately amusing.

Two things sink the film. One, there's a concentration on rock performance (in a garage and at the condo), so the movie feels like an extended (and dull) music video. The music, including "Tokyo Convertible" and "Don't Let Go," just isn't that good, and besides, musical interludes rarely work in horror movies, because they slow down the pace. Secondly, Brock insists on letting the camera ogle the girls in the band. They drink together and have a topless pillow fight. Now, on one hand, this is an utter delight if you're a red-blooded male. But on the other hand, how many young women do you know how act like this in each other's company? And again, stopping for a "tease" pillow fight like this only undercuts what little sense of pace and urgency the film has.

Historically, *Slumber Party Massacre 2* is notable only because it evidences two important trends from the Reagan decade. On the first count, it's the sequel to a slasher film, but one that—in honor of Freddy's success—injects the rubber reality premise into the proceedings. This puts it on a par with *Silent Night, Deadly Night 3* and *Hello Mary Lou, Prom Night 2*. Secondly, it's a direct-to-video "brand name" sequel to a well-known slasher, much like the latter *Sleepaway Camp* films. Reading this paragraph and considering the films listed herein, one can guess that production quality is pretty low, as is any sense of continuity with previous franchise entries.

"Some day, we're going to be in movies and rock videos and everything," one band-mate predicts in *Slumber Party Massacre 2*. Not if they list this film on their résumé, they won't.



Cast and Crew

CAST: Shirley Jane Harris (Mrs. Walton); Tanya Gordon, Jayne Hutton, Heath Potter, Ken Marshall, Lindsey Reardon, Michelle Corey, Christopher D'Orthez, Maxine John, Heilie Oeschger, Joanna Rowlands.

CREW: Nelson Entertainment. *Music:* Dan Hill, Kevin Kruger. *Film Editor:* Bernie Boys. *Director of Photography:* Alwyn Kumst. *Associate Producer:* Barry Wood. *Executive Producers:* Avi Lerner. *Producer:* Thys Heyns, Paul Raleigh. *Written and Directed by:* John Bernard. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A rapist and murderer named William John Brown swears to return as the Angel of Darkness just as he executed for the deaths of eleven women. Some years later, in Europe, St. Mary's School for Girls holds an all-night fund raiser called a "stay awake" where the killer returns, first as an unseen, stalking force, and then as a demon. Mrs. Walton (Harris), the girls' science teacher, grows nervous as the night goes on and strange things start to happen. When the caretaker is murdered (his heart removed) and the girls start to disappear, the so-called stay awake becomes a battle to the death between Walton and this Angel of Darkness, with the girls (and some mischievous boys from town) caught in the middle.

COMMENTARY: It's an ill (and homicidal) wind that blows in *The Stay Awake*. And boy, does it blow...

The unseen force featured in this hysterically bad horror film is actually the non-corporeal spirit of an executed serial killer, one who spends an inordinate amount of time hiding behind a potted plant in one school corridor, and vexing the custodian with his foul odor (which according to the caretaker is "like the ass end of a cow"). This unsavory facet of the killer's personality allows plenty of characters to say things like "Hey guys! Where's that awful smell coming from?"

There's not really much more to the movie than that. At least not anything that makes sense. For instance, early in the film it's established that the St Mary's School for Girls is in Europe, so why do all the students (and teachers) speak with a heavy Australian accent? Could it be because the film was made in Australia? If that's it, why didn't the creators of the film just set it there too?

Leaving aside a totally phony-looking demon that appears in the flesh

for the finale, the film is also quite wretched from a technical standpoint. The P.O.V. stalking shots are a prime example of this failing, among the worst ever put to celluloid. Some of these sequences are staged at such a low angle that at times (in the science lab, for instance), we can't even see over the counter tops! No wonder the killer likes to hide in corners and potted plants ... he can't see anything above knee-level!

Some other “delightful” aspects to *The Stay Awake*:

- In a shower sequence, the camera hovers *just above* cleavage level throughout, and never goes lower. Like the rest of the movie, the scene's a tease. You never see anything...
- No follow-through. Every time it looks like there's going to be an interesting murder, the film cuts away to a different scene, denying us the pleasure of watching the highly interchangeable characters die on-camera.
- The dialogue is unintentionally ridiculous. When the serial killer rings the frightened girls on the school telephone (he must have seen *Murder by Phone*), he actually pauses to identify himself during the chat. “You can call me the Angel of Darkness,” he suggests. How thoughtful. Maybe now they can block his number...
- Our “final girl,” Mrs. Walton is the worst teacher. *Ever*. She witnesses a student being attacked and doesn't even lift a finger to help. “All we can do is find a phone,” she suggests. Why, to ring up the Angel of Darkness again?

The Stay Awake is a cut-rate supernatural-slasher hybrid that dreams of being a “rubber reality”/Freddy Krueger-style venture (down to the recitation of a Jack and Jill nursery rhyme for creepy effect). It fails to succeed on virtually every level imaginable, but there is one moment that's really scary.

Close to the denouement, the Angel of Darkness—now a demon boasting rat-ears—warns, “This is only the beginning.” Thankfully, this terrifying boast is wrong, and a cheesy pop tune is soon playing over the end credits...

The Stepfather

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[*The Stepfather*] addresses the dark side of family life and small-town America. More unusual is the fact that the film takes a feminist position, foregrounding patriarchal power but positing the maternal order in opposition to the destructive elements of patriarchy.”—Patricia Brett Erens, *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1987–1988, page 48.

“Perhaps a little derivative of Freddy Krueger with some of the wisecracks, but this film offered a nice twist on the nuclear family, and in particular, showing us a political reactionary at work, who will kill to maintain a facade of a happy family. Terry O’Quinn does a fine job mixing Mr. Rogers with a psychotic killer who’s absolutely convinced of the moral correctness of his insanity. There’s a lot one can read into this film—nicely done.”—William Latham, author, *Eternity Unbound*, *Mary’s Monster*, *Space: 1999—Resurrection*.

“I watched this one with my stepson, and ‘You’re starting to disappoint me’ has now entered our household vocabulary. Really, is a little perfection too much to ask?”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Terry O’Quinn (Jerry Blake/Henry Morrison); Jill Schoelen (Stephanie); Shelly Hack (Susan); Charles Lanyer (Dr. Bondurant); Stephen Shellen (Jim Ogilvie); Stephen E. Miller (Al Brennan); Robyn Steven (Karen); Jeff Schultz (Paul Baker); Lindsay Bourne (Art Teacher); Anna Hagan (Mrs. Leitnner); Gillian Barber (Annie Barnes); Blu Mankuma (Lt. Jack Will); Jackson Davies (Mr. Chesterton); Sandra Head (Receptionist); Gabrielle Rose (Dorothy); Margot Pinvidic (Mrs. Anderson); Don S. Williams (Mr. Stark).

CREW: *Presented by:* ITC Productions. *Casting:* Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Judy Taylor. *Music:* Patrick Moraz. *Film Editor:* George Bowers. *Production Designer:* James William Newport. *Director of Photography:* John W. Lindley. *Story:* Carolyn Lefcourt, Brian Garfield, Donald E. Westlake. *Screenplay by:* Donald E. Westlake. *Producer:* Jay Benson. *Directed by:* Joseph Ruben. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sixteen-year-old Stephanie (Schoelen) intensely dislikes her new stepfather, Jerry Blake (O’Quinn), and has been acting out at school over his increasingly important role in her life following the death of her biological father a year earlier. When a newspaper prints a story about a man who killed his entire family a year ago, Stephanie

comes to believe that Jerry is the murderer. Her suspicions prove correct: Jerry kills her psychiatrist Dr. Bondurant (Lanyer) when he gets too close to the truth. When Stephanie begins dating, Jerry gets angry and grows disappointed that this family isn't perfect either, especially when he quarrels with her mother, Susan (Hack). Very quietly and under the radar, Jerry quits his job and plans to find a new family elsewhere. Finally, he is ready to murder Stephanie and Susan, just like he did his previous family.

The brother of a victim, Ogilvie (Shellen), has been looking for Jerry, once known as Henry Morrison. The final battle for control of the family is waged in Susan's house, as Jerry's murderous proclivities are unleashed.

COMMENTARY: Domestic violence, the tableau of the gripping psychological horror film *The Stepfather*, was on the rise in the late 1980s. More than 26,000 males were arrested for the crime in the United States in 1987, the year of the film's release, and that figure grew through the rest of the decade: over 30,000 arrests in 1988, and nearly 40,000 in 1989. Earlier, in 1984 to be specific, a concerned President Reagan had established the Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence to look into the rising epidemic of domestic abuse in America.

What could explain the increase in violence in the 1980s? It's difficult to determine. For one thing, record keeping may simply have been better in the 1980s, so perhaps there was no increase at all, only that society had grown more efficient at logging violent events that had once been hush-hush and considered "personal" family matters. There's no simple answer. Perhaps as a society, we just grew more open and willing to talk about the things that went on behind closed doors.

The Stepfather reflects the reality of the 1980s. Not that every step-parent was evil, but that the problem of domestic violence had surfaced and more people were aware of it. Considering that the divorce rate was up considerably in the 1980s (thanks to a national trend known as "No Fault Divorce"), the fear being reflected in the film is that of integrating an "unknown" into the family unit. A "replacement" parent who has no history with the family could—in your worst nightmare—be anyone, even a serial killer. In the film, Terry O'Quinn's Jerry Blake marries Shelly Hack's Susan, and there was apparently very little discussion about his past before their nuptials. It is interesting how so many fears of the 1980s involve intimacies with people who might be betrayers like disease carriers or

step-parents who might be violent offenders. Conservatives make the claim that the 1970s were the era when society was breaking down, but given the films of the 1980s, it is the decade of Reagan that seems to harbor the most suspicion, and feature the most danger to children, if not entire families.

Throughout this text, the duality of the 1980s has been discussed. This is the difference between the surface image and the real value of that image. It's "Don't Worry Be Happy" versus "Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid," as discussed in the introduction, and this conflict between illusion and reality is very much at the heart of *The Stepfather*. On the surface, this looks like a normal blended family. The "new" father has a good job, likes puttering in his basement work shop, puts up custom-designed bird houses in the spacious backyard and espouses the glories of family at neighborhood picnics.

Yet the dark side of this picture is that Jerry is a psychotic who with premeditation prepares to kill the family members who disappoint him, and then move on to another new family. Jerry's killing spree is the equivalent of a no-fault divorce in horror: When something doesn't work, he kills and starts over, welcomed into a new home and hearth without so much as a probing question.

What leads Jerry to kill? Why is he constantly disappointed in his families? *The Stepfather* provides the answers in a very interesting form: television. Throughout the film, the script references TV families. Jerry notes at the dinner table that "Father knows best," a reference to the Robert Young TV series of the 1950s. Later, "Ward Cleaver" is brought up, a reference to a different (but equally perfect) TV father.

In one sequence, Jerry is depicted watching *Mr. Ed* on television and he tells Susan that he was a young adult before he realized that horses couldn't talk. What he's truly revealing in this scene is that he has trouble discerning TV from reality. He was weaned on TV—on *Leave It to Beaver*, on *Father Knows Best*, even on *Mr. Ed*, and he believes that's how life should be. Yet in real life, family is often very messy. There's sibling rivalry, adultery, resentments and basic stresses over budget, in-laws and the like. It can never be as "perfect" as the images on TV, and Jerry doesn't understand that. So when he sees his family failing him, it's easier to "cancel" that family and begin with a more perfect group than to stick it out and work through the difficulties.

The importance of television in Jerry's life is highlighted even during his sadistic killing spree. While plotting an "accident" for the

psychiatrist, Bondurant, he quips at the doctor's car, "Buckle up for safety!" Anyone who watched television in the 1980s will recognize that immediately as part of a public service announcement and jingle that ran for years. Jerry has internalized its message in a weird way, just as he has "gotten the message" of family television. If you're imperfect, you're not good enough.

The Stepfather also puts truth to the lie that everyone who appears conservative and espouses family values is actually a good person. "You really are a cheerleader for the good old traditional values, aren't you?" one character asks Jerry. He is, absolutely, but his old traditional values also include murder. When you look at some of the so-called "heroes" of the 1980s it's actually interesting to do a tally on the problems. Reagan was a divorcee when he entered office; Jane Wyman was his first wife. How's that for traditional values? Oliver North, a soldier and "hero" to the right, broke the law and allegedly lied to Congress. How's that for ideal behavior? And what about all the corrupt 1980s businessmen (Boesky, Milken) or men of God (Jimmy Swaggart, Bakker)? All these citizens represent the 1980s because they capture the essence of the "Don't Worry, Be Happy" and "Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid" dynamic. On the surface they appear to be one thing (traditional, law-abiding, heroic, godly) but in reality they are quite different (divorced, criminal). Jerry Blake is an extreme version of this "conflicted" image. He wears the right clothes and lives in the right neighborhood, but underneath he's a predator.

In many ways, *The Stepfather* is a perfect time capsule from the late 1980s, but it's also a rip-roaring good horror film with a devious sense of humor. There's a deadpan visual joke early in the film as O'Quinn leaves his first home, the site of a massacre. He casts one look over at the "living" room before he leaves. His whole family is sprawled out dead there, on the floor and the furniture. A living room of the dead, get it? The entire film operates on that deranged level, but O'Quinn doesn't go for camp humor. At points, tongue may be in cheek, but he also imbues Jerry with an earnestness and intensity that makes the character iconic (and paved the way for the inevitable sequel). His best moment comes at a family dinner scene. He is seated at the head of the table, flanked by Susan and Stephanie. By this point, he is disappointed in them and has decided they must die. The camera zooms in slowly on Jerry as he eats his supper, his eyes shifting from side-to-side. He is silent, but we realize exactly what he is thinking, and it's scary. This scene also contrasts with the earlier Thanksgiving dinner sequence, when times were happier and everything was "perfect." There, Jerry was effusive and ebullient about finally understanding the true meaning of the holiday. Now, he is inside his

own head, consumed by murderous thoughts, and these thoughts play out in his eyes in a naked, revealing fashion.

If *The Stepfather* bears any weaknesses, they come in the form of a weak '80s-style electric score, and the scenes involving Ogilvie, who rushes to save Stephanie at the end, only to be killed within seconds. There was so much build-up involving this character and his revenge, and then he's dispatched with ridiculous ease, which makes him look exceedingly foolish. Wasn't he expecting to run into Jerry, and wouldn't he have been ready for him, knowing that he killed his sister and her entire family?

In its final moments, the film achieves a kind of artistic grandeur. The final shot in *The Stepfather* reveals one of Jerry's custom-built birdhouses, a small representation of the modern American suburban home, turned over on its side. In the same shot, mother and daughter walk triumphantly away from the camera, out of frame. They are victorious because they have beaten Jerry's patriarchal "world vision" and its ultimate symbol. They've turned over the house of *Father Knows Best* and Ward Cleaver and left it toppled on the ground, aware perhaps that it was an image that subjugated them, and ultimately, was nothing more than a lie. Father didn't know best. Father was a psycho.

Street Trash

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bill Chepil (The Cop); Mike Lackey (Fred); Vic Noto (Bronson); Jane Arakawa (Wendy); Nicole Potter (Winette); Miriam Zucker (Drunken Wench); Clarenze Jarmon (Burt); Bernard Perlman (Wizzy); Marc Sferrazza (Kevin); Tony Darrow (Nick Duran); James Lorinz (Doorman); R.L. Ryan (Frank Schnizer).

CREW: *Presented by:* Chaos Productions. *Music:* Ric Ulfik. *Film Editor:* Dennis Werner. *Director of Photography:* David Sperling. *Production Designer:* Robert Marcucci. *Special Makeup Effects:* Jennifer Aspinall, Mike Lackey, Scott Coulter, Dean Kartalas, Gary Yee. *Executive Producers:* James Muro, Sr., Edward Muro, Sr. *Written and produced by:* Roy Frumkes. *Directed by:* Jim Muro. *MPAA Rating:* Unrated. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I haven't had a decent bowel movement in a

month.”—The vicissitude of life in the streets. From *Street Trash*.

SYNOPSIS: The homeless winos of New York City have a new problem to contend with amidst their already-difficult day-to-day lives: Ed's Liquor Store is now selling a 60-year-old alcohol brand called Tenafly Viper that is quite poisonous. Worse, it thoroughly dissolves the drinker, as one wino learns on a trip to the toilet. Meanwhile, at an auto junkyard run by a fat, arrogant man, sexy young Wendy (Arakawa) takes it upon herself to care for the winos who reside in the yard, including young Fred (Lackey). The police investigate as the deaths related to the Tenafly Viper mount, and before long, the poisoned spirits make their way to the junkyard.

COMMENTARY: *Street Trash* is a mean-spirited little film that tries very hard to be funny, but its humor is sometimes more sick than inspired. Like the homeless people of America (homeless by choice, Reagan would remind us!) didn't have enough problems to contend with in the 1980s without low-budget exploitation movies which depicted them as filthy, drunken rapists. It's true that *Street Trash* boasts a few laughs (hence the two-star rating), but that's hardly enough to make watching the film a palatable experience. For a low-budget production, however, *Street Trash* is actually shot fairly well—even efficiently—and many of the special effects, including a final-reel decapitation, remain quite impressive.

Most of *Street Trash* isn't actually horror in tone, but consists of bums undertaking comic hijinks, both verbal and physical. The actors playing the bums mug and chortle shamelessly, all while doing shtick, like shoplifting frozen meat from a grocery store and shoving it down their pants. Later on, one bum reveals his childhood trauma. His dad returned from Vietnam and couldn't watch *Godzilla* movies without shouting “Gook alert.” Nice. Let's throw a little racism into the mix too!

This material is passably vetted, if not particularly funny, but it's the rest of the movie that degenerates into ugliness. For one thing, there's a tremendous amount of material here devoted to rape, attempted rape and the beating-up of women. For example, an inebriated woman, listed as “Drunken Wench” in the end credits, is carried off by bums after consensual sex with one, and then gang-raped, murdered and her body left discarded in the junkyard.

Then there's the fat obnoxious auto yard owner, who attempts to rape kindly Wendy, pinning her down in a chair with his disgusting, sweaty girth. The Vietnam vet's main squeeze is also treated badly. She

spends the film garbed in only a filthy white bra and panties, whining like a shrew until killed by the Tenafly. It's enough to make an exploitation film about bums, but why make one that evidences such overt hatred for women? Is that really necessary?

Actually, it's probably wrong to credit *Street Trash* with a hatred of women. It's doubtful that anyone involved with writing the script actually ever met one. Why? In one thoroughly ridiculous scene, the beautiful Wendy seduces one of her wards, the young bum named Fred. His face is still splotched with dirt, but she sits him down (in her place of business no less), strips him, and is about to perform fellatio on him when she is (let's be thankful!) interrupted. So, here's a woman who is so kind and compliant that not only will she risk her job to pleasure a bum, she won't even insist he shower before performing oral sex on him. Application for Sainthood approved!

Still, *Street Trash* at times is amusing and is viscerally disgusting, which is surely a compliment. The toilet bowl death sequence, in which a bum dissolves while taking a crap, is some kind of high watermark for low-brow horror movies. This is the film's first significant death, and it's also *Street Trash*'s best until a decapitation scene. Another murder, one involving a bum on a fire escape, becomes unintentionally funny, relying on the reaction shot of a nonplussed black cat for effect. No doubt, the cat had better things to do, and that's why it skitters away so compliantly.

Unsane
(a.k.a. *Tenebrae*)
★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anthony Franciosa (Peter Neal); Christian Borromeo (Gianni); Mirella D'Angelo (Tilde); Veronica Lario (Jane McKerrow); Ania Pieroni (Elsa); Eva Robins (Girl on Beach); Carola Stagharo (Detective Altieri); John Steiner (Christiano Berti); Lara Wendel (Maria); John Saxon (Bullmer); Dario Nicolodi (Anne); Giuliana Gimma (Detective Germani).

CREW: Salvatore Argento Presents a film by Dario Argento. *Story:* Dario Argento. *Screenplay by:* Dario Argento, George Kemp. *Director of Photography:* Luciano Tovoli. *Art director:* Giuseppe Bassan. *Costume Designer:* Pierangelo Cicoletti. *Film Editor:* Franco Fraticelli. *Music:*

Simonetti Pignatelli Morante. *First Assistant Director*: Lamberto Bava. *Producer*: Claudio Argento. *Directed by*: Dario Argento. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 91 minutes (American cut); 101 minutes (international cut).

SYNOPSIS: As New York author Peter Neal (Franciosa) travels to Rome to promote his crime thriller *Tenebrae*, which has been derided as sexist in some quarters, a gloved assailant murders a young woman in her Rome home, slitting her throat with a straight razor, force-feeding her pages from the novel, and photographing her corpse.

Police question Peter about the murder because the killer in his book also utilizes a straight razor, but Peter is cleared when he receives a note from the killer that includes a passage from the book in it. Soon, more murders occur, including those of a lesbian couple ... which also leads back to Neal's literary work. Among the suspects are Jane (Lario), Neal's angry ex, who is having an affair with his agent (Saxon), and a prominent Italian TV critic (Steiner), who believes that the message of *Tenebrae* concerns ridding the world of human corruption, perversion and aberrant behavior.

COMMENTARY: Director Dario Argento is up to his stylish old *giallo* tricks again in the ultra-violent *Unsane* (also known as *Tenebrae*), a film made in 1982 but released in the States in February of 1987. Of all the Italian horror directors working in the 1980s, I reserve deepest affection and admiration for Argento. Perhaps this is because I still recall my visceral response to a first viewing of his supernatural masterpiece, *Suspiria*.

Frankly, *Unsane* isn't anywhere near *Suspiria*'s class, but it is so unremittingly gory and the film's climax is so over-the-top and disgusting that the film earns its (Americanized) title. It is, truly, *unsane* [sic].

Unsane is a violent crime drama—as the term *giallo* indicates—concerning Peter Neal, whose literary achievements are always derided by critics as misogynist. Making matters worse, a vicious killer is using Neal's latest book, *Tenebrae*, as his play book for committing crimes in Rome. One feels Argento making a personal statement with this plot line, as he's often accosted with just such criticism. The police suspect Peter is the murderer, and red herrings abound, including an odd local TV critic who suggests on the air that the killer is eliminating that which he sees “as corruption” in society (meaning lesbians and the like).

In most of these movies, an avid film lover may guess the identity of the culprit before the big reveal, but not here, I wager. Honestly, the film's last act surprised me in all its facets; in its straight-faced ferocity, in its sting-in-the-tail/tale, and in the revelation of the killer's identity.

When I write of ferocity, I'm referring to the moment wherein one character sees her arm chopped off by an axe and the remaining stump fountains blood everywhere. This sequence can only be described as a superb achievement in gore, inventive and simultaneously revolting. Set against a white background, the startling scarlet blood splatter is like some Jackson Pollock-like expression of living, murderous art. Again, it seems there's a personal statement here underlying the action. Argento's images are such a combination of the macabre and the beautiful that one senses he's proclaiming with this scene (and a few others) that, yes, horror is his canvas. Take it or leave it, but this is the medium where he paints his masterpieces.

Finally, just when the movie seems to have ended and the killer—fearing capture—slits his own throat, the movie pops back to life for more mayhem. Argento has his fun, that's for sure.

After the killer is revealed, the movie virtually demands a repeat viewing so as to suss out the details. I did watch *Unsane* a second time and liked it even better. I believe Argento incorporates these bracing, borderline offensive visuals (like a reverse fellatio involving a shoe heel) to keep audiences off-balance, off the mystery's scent. His images are so powerful and outrageous that they would never pass muster in touchy Hollywood, and these images do succeed in distracting.

On the one hand, I respect the director's dedication to this form immensely and appreciate his always dazzling camerawork, but on the other hand, I can't help but think the films would work better with more plausible storylines and more coherent narratives.

But then the gory distractions wouldn't be so important, and I guess we'd be talking about a whole different brand of cinema here. I do have to wonder, however, if Argento got a chuckle out of making his surrogate in the film—the artist, Peter Neal—the originator of the horror in *Unsane*. It's like he's pointing the finger at himself.

February 11: Anthony Kennedy is appointed to the Supreme Court, after two other nominees (Bork and Ginsburg) are scuttled.

February 21–22: Embroiled in a sex scandal, Jimmy Swaggart pleads for public forgiveness on TV.

March 16: Lt. Colonel Oliver North and Vice Admiral John Poindexter are indicted on charges of conspiracy over their roles in the Iran-Contra scandal engulfing the Reagan Administration.

May 15: After eight years of occupation, the Soviet Army begins its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

August 16: Republican presidential nominee (and vice president) George Bush announces his pick for a running mate: Indiana's Dan Quayle. Later, it is learned that this hard-line hawk served in the National Guard rather than fight in Vietnam. World War II vets heckle Quayle as a draft dodger.

August 29: The WWF (World Wrestling Federation) sponsors its first Summer Slam, starring such larger-than-life figures as Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant.

September 13: Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis rides around in a tank for a photo op and ends up looking ridiculous. The press compares him to Snoopy.

September 29: Space shuttle flights resume for the first time since the Challenger disaster.

October 4: The infamous Willie Horton ad is first aired on television.

November 8: Bush wins his race for the White House against Democratic contender Dukakis. Bush's running mate and the new Vice-President is Dan Quayle.

December 21: Pan Am Flight 103 explodes in the skies over Lockerbie, Scotland, in a plot orchestrated by Libyan terrorists. On the ground and in the plane, 270 are dead.

Anguish

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Zelda Rubinstein (The Mommy); Michael Lerner (John Pressman); Talia Paul (Patty); Angel Jove (Killer); Clara Pastor (Linda); Isabel Garcia Lorca (Caroline); Nat Baker (Old Movie: Teaching Doctor); Edward Ledden (Old Movie: Doctor); Janet Porter (Old Movie: Lab Nurse); Josephine Borchard (Old Movie: Concession Stand Girl); Antonella Murgias (Old Movie: Ticket Girl); Georgie Pinkley (Old Movie: Laura); Kit Kincannon (Salesman); Joy Blackburn (Concession Stand Girl); Marc Maloney (Elderly Man); Jean Paul Soto (Manny).

CREW: Samba P.C.-Luna Films Presents a Pepon Coromina Production, a Bigas Luna Film. *Film Editor:* Tom Sabin. *Music:* J.M. Pagan. *Screenplay Dialogue by:* Michael Berlin. *Director of Photography:* J.M. Civit. *Executive Producers:* Andres Coromina, George Ayoub. *Produced by:* Pepon Coromina. *Screenplay and Directed by:* Bigas Luna. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You have no idea what it’s like to really suffer. But you will. You’ll be sorry.”—The Mommy, played by Zelda Rubinstein, issues a warning in the self-reflexive *Anguish*.

SYNOPSIS: John Pressman (Lerner), a medical orderly and repressed lunatic who is gradually losing his vision, lives in a mansion with his bizarre, over-controlling mother. John makes trips out into the night to surgically excise the eyes of well-to-do patients at the hospital, and on one occasion goes after the rude Caroline Robinson (Lorca). But all this terror is just a movie called *The Mommy*, being shown at a theater in Culver City, California. A full audience, including two terrified girls, Patty (Paul) and Linda (Pastor), are mesmerized by the hypnotic horror film, but Patty begins to feel ill and downright paranoid.

On the movie screen, John—the psycho killer—stalks a movie theater playing *The Lost World*, and Patty starts fearing that a killer is in that very auditorium. Unfortunately, her suspicions prove correct, and a man with a gun and Mommy fixation holds up the theater, taking Patty hostage. Art imitates life as on the screen, John also takes a hostage, an incident precipitating a stand-off with the police.

COMMENTARY: *Anguish* is a fascinating, self-aware horror movie that probably garners more points for inventive concept than execution. The film isn’t exactly Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) in terms of quality, yet it navigates some of the same rarified thematic territory, exploring the intriguing notion that movies and reality blend

in ways perhaps too uncomfortable to contemplate easily. In effect, *Anguish* is a movie-within-a-movie about a cowering, frightened final girl named Patty who watches a terrifying genre flick called *The Mommy*, but—in the same theater, while that movie unspools—is confronted with a *real* mommy-obsessed serial killer. The two worlds converge, until reality is virtually indiscernible.

Anguish begins without awareness on the audience's part that it is watching a film-within-a-film. Instead, taking it at face value, *Anguish* appears to concern a menacing chap, an orderly (played by Michael Lerner) who lives with his mother (Zelda Rubinstein) in a creepy old house and is urged to kill people. Early in the film, the audience witnesses real eyeball surgery, which is distasteful and unsettling, and then watches as the Mommy sends out her simpleton son to steal the eyes of a nasty woman named Mrs. Robinson. Lerner slits the victim's throat with a scalpel (and we see her bloody neck) and then he takes the eyeballs.

Throughout this segment, Rubinstein's unmistakable voice, a helium-balloon squeal, urges the orderly to continue his wayward ways. "Go on. Go on. Go on. Go on," she repeats. "All the eyes of the city will be ours. All the eyes of the city will be ours. All the eyes of the city will be ours..."

The deliberate, sing-song repetition becomes infuriating, but then also strangely hypnotic, especially in conjunction with a rotating hypno-wheel that appears on the screen, as though we too are to be victims of the very persuasive Mommy. It's at approximately this point, twenty minutes or so into the film, that it shifts gears and a new reality unfolds. We're introduced to Patty, sitting in a theater with her friend, watching Lerner's story on the big silver screen. The girl is frightened; she doesn't like horror movies. What's more, the spinning images and repetitive sound effects make her feel a little nauseous.

In one thoroughly inspired moment, young Patty watches Lerner on the movie screen walk into a movie theater. He sits down in an auditorium to watch *The Lost World*. So now get this: We're watching a movie, *Anguish*, in which a girl named Patty is watching a movie called *The Mommy*, in which a serial killer played by Michael Lerner watches *The Lost World*. Got it? Making matters more complicated, and further blurring the layers of reality, Lerner's auditorium and Patty's (Talia Paul) movie house look virtually identical, so it becomes difficult to discern which movie-within-a-movie we're actually in. Who's in which audience? Is that Lerner sitting behind Patty, or someone else?

Although an interesting genre experiment in self-reflexivity, and one that would ultimately lead the way to such reality-benders as the *Scream* series, *Anguish* is not a terribly fun movie to endure. The message—life imitates art—reaches its fever pitch as a hostage situation on-screen (in *The Mommy*) blends into a hostage situation involving Patty and the real killer ... as they watch *The Mommy*.

At one point, Lerner says “I want your eyes too” and faces the screen to jab a scalpel into the eye of a girl in the audience. Patty takes the stab to the eye, it appears, but not really. ... she just imagined she did, so twisted is she by all this back-and-forth. This is inventive stuff, no doubt, as is the fact that three movies (*The Lost World*, *The Mommy* and *Anguish*) all involve panicking crowds at precisely the same moment.

Above all, *Anguish* is a movie about the power of film; about how movies “take our eyes” and can confuse the viewer. When is a movie real? When is a movie *unreal*? Films like Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) blended documentary and fictional footage, for example. If a movie is unreal, can it still be the inspiration for people to commit violence?

In the early 1990s, the British media reported that a boy, Jamie Bolger, committed murder after watching the film *Child’s Play III*, but that may or not be accurate. The point is that many of society’s self-appointed moral guardians (including those in the mainstream media) do often fear that horror movies provoke real-life violence. However, it seems the contrary may actually be true (though not often considered by pundits): More likely that events in real life spawn horror movies.

The advent of the death metal music genre gave the world *Trick or Treat*; the Cabbage Patch doll craze of the early 1980s spawned *Child’s Play*; the McDonald’s Massacre of 1984 resulted in *Bloody Wednesday*, and so forth. Moviemakers respond to the times, the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. They interpret it, reflect it, or otherwise re-shape it into art. Even *Anguish*—while ostensibly doing the opposite—accomplishes that task: It takes the fear that movies confuse reality and fiction (a theory further proven by the appearance of a Stephen King horror novel in the film) and weaves terror around the concept.

Some of *Anguish* is pretty scary, and the sting in the tail/tale suggests that Patty has forever lost the capacity to discern the real from the imagined. There’s much imagery involving caged birds, an apt metaphor for both the simpleton orderly played by Lerner and Patty herself. Both are trapped in unusual cages (theaters), but ones that

they can see out of, and peer into another world. Yet despite all this fine, artistic material, sometimes *Anguish* feels almost too hypnotic for its own good. Zelda Rubinstein drones and drones metronome-like, and hypno-wheels spin and spin, and before long the audience isn't just mesmerized, but actually exhausted.

Bad Dreams

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Rubin (Cynthia); Bruce Abbott (Dr. Alex Karmen); Richard Lynch (Franklin Harris); Dean Cameron (Ralph Pescow); Harris Yulin (Dr. Berrisford); Susan Barnes (Connie); John Scott Clough (Victor); E.G. Daily (Lana); Damita Jo Freeman (Gilda); Louis Gandalvo (Ed); Sy Richardson (Detective Wasserman); Susan Ruttan (Miriam); Missy Francis (Young Cynthia); Richard Fleischer (Ron the Pharmacist).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox Presents a No Frills Film Production, an Andrew Fleming Film. *Music:* Jay Ferguson. *Director of Photography:* Alexander Gruszynski. *Screenplay by:* Andrew Fleming, Steven E. De Souza. *Story by:* Andrew Fleming, Michael Dick, P.J. Pettrette, Yuri Zeltser. *Produced by:* Gale Ann Hurd. *Makeup:* Michele Burke. *Special Effects Makeup:* Richard Snell. *Stunt Coordinator:* Tony Cecere. *Fantasy 2 Film Effects:* Gene Warren Jr. *Directed by:* Andrew Fleming. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

INCANTATION: “You want to fit into the eighties? You’re at least two divorces, a condo and a yeast infection behind the time. Why don’t you just stick to the seventies and move to Cleveland?”—A cynical patient named Miriam (Susan Ruttan) tells a newly awakened Cynthia (Jennifer Rubin) that the present isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, in Andrew Fleming’s *Bad Dreams*.

SYNOPSIS: Cynthia (Rubin) has been in a coma for over thirteen years, ever since she survived a fire at a commune called Unity Fields that claimed the life of guru and cult leader Franklin Harris (Lynch) and 24 followers.

Cynthia awakens suddenly in the 1980s and is put under the care of a psychiatrist named Dr. Berrisford (Yulin), who has some unusual notions about suicidal ideation and the importance of human will. He enrolls Cynthia in Dr. Alex Karmen’s (Abbott) group therapy sessions

with other troubled clients, including one with violent mood swings (Cameron), two sex addicts (Barnes and Gambalvio), a paranoid (Freeman), a depressive (Ruttan), and a withdrawn girl named Lana (Daily).

Cynthia begins to experience visions of her last terrible days at Unity Fields, and worse, Harris seems to return from the dead—horribly scarred and burned—to summon her to “eternal bliss” at the commune. When the other members of the therapy group die in bloody fashion, Dr. Abbott suspects it is not Harris who is orchestrating the violence from beyond the grave, but someone else with a secret agenda.

COMMENTARY: *Bad Dreams* starts out like a *Nightmare on Elm Street* rubber-reality horror film, and then ends, disappointingly, on a note that lands the effort in the same “psychiatric” camp as John Huston’s middling 1980 film, *Phobia*. *Bad Dreams* features the same “therapy group” structure as *Phobia* and *Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors*, but that’s okay because the villain, a charismatic cult leader named Harris played with diabolical glee by Richard Harris, is such a memorable individual.

It’s just too bad that the film de-fangs this villain (who was trumpeted in the genre press as competition for Freddy Krueger’s throne) with an ending that establishes, without question, that Harris died in a fire nearly two decades earlier and isn’t involved with the contemporary murders. This is the 1980s equivalent of those old horror movies in which it seemed like a house was haunted by ghosts ... until it was all revealed to be a hoax. That’s just as disappointing a conclusion as the one featured here.

Apparently, liberals not only lost the elections of 1980, 1984 and 1988, they lost the war of public perception about the turbulent 1960s era too. Once upon a time, the hippie movement and “flower power” boasted good connotations, but by the end of the 1980s it was the monsters like Charles Manson or Jim Jones that seemed to define that culture and that era. So it’s not terribly surprising that in *Bad Dreams*, a peaceful commune by the name of Unity Fields is depicted in totally negative terms. It’s a place of slavish devotion to a crazy guru (Harris) and perverted sexual relationships (Cynthia is called Harris’s “love child” and it’s pretty clear he has an unhealthy interest in her), and drugs appear to have transformed the commune-goers into sheep willing to die on Harris’s say-so. Indeed, the movie begins on a dark note at Harris’s holy baptism, which utilizes gasoline instead of water, and thus puts a fine point on the film’s message: This was an age of

crazy people.

To *Bad Dreams*' credit, it's an equal opportunity offender. The filmmakers don't appear to like the 1980s any better. The film rags on the tabloid culture, the dependence on psychiatric drugs and, most of all, the age's overwhelming cynicism and obsession with the individual over community. All the patients in Cynthia's group are self-obsessed, borderline personalities. They are inner-directed to the max, wanting only things for themselves and having no concept of the common good. Ruttan's character even writes for a magazine called, amusingly, *Me*. But since Unity Fields was "the last gasp of the Age of Aquarius" its particular brand of group-think is discredited too. Perhaps this is why Cynthia feels at home nowhere. The past offers nothing, and neither does the present. That's why suicide, I guess, seems so appealing an option to her.

Culture politics aside, *Bad Dreams* is one of those movies in which it appears one thing is happening, but something else is actually occurring. To wit, nasty Dr. Berrisford is experimenting with all the patients in the borderline personality group, hoping that they will commit suicide. Cynthia—who just happens to see each group member shortly before their deaths—believes that Harris is after her and killing her friends. Cynthia's reality is where the film works best, and director Andrew Fleming has mastered the art of the surprising reveal. In one scary scene involving a crowded elevator and a flickering ceiling light, the burned, grotesque Harris appears. In another scene set in the same elevator, Harris appears alongside Ruttan, waving happily to Cynthia before a murder, and his presence is again unexpected and creepy.

Bad Dreams is gory too. Connie and Ed get pulped by a turbine, and blood sprays down from the ceiling onto Cynthia, nurses and patients (all wearing white uniforms, of course). Ralph's death is probably the hardest take. To a heavy metal rendition of "My Way" he goes nuts in the basement and proceeds to slice himself from abdomen to chest with a pair of scalpels.

I remember seeing *Bad Dreams* in a theater back in 1988, and my problem with it has always been that the movie doesn't have the courage of its convictions. It so desperately wants to be a rubber-reality movie with a Freddy Krueger-like villain, but ultimately chickens out to be a more grounded picture about the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. I submit that the film would have been better if Harris were a ghost, returning to claim Cynthia. He's a fantastic bogeyman, the flashbacks to Unity Fields are the best part of the film,

and the other ending doesn't really make sense. Although *Phobia* boasts the same conclusion, I find it hard to believe that a doctor at the top of his profession is so desperate to prove his reputation that he would start killing people. If anything, that's a way to threaten one's reputation, not enhance it. So I never believed the motives of the Berrisford character at all.

Secondly, if *Bad Dreams'* ending is to be taken seriously, one must believe that mental illness and dementia work by a very specific set of rules. Specifically, Cynthia knows which patient is going to die next, and so her brain conjures an image of Harris alongside that person just beforehand. Furthermore, Harris' appearance must be set piece appropriate. In other words, if someone is going to die in a pool, he has to be near a pool. If someone is going to go out a window, he must be in the elevator at the end of the hall with that person. It's all just too neat and tidy, and mental illness just doesn't function that cleanly.

Perhaps the movie wants us to believe that Dr. Berrisford is really "there" with each of those patients about to die, whispering like Iago in their ears, and that Cynthia—because of her medication—visually interprets his presence as somehow equating to Harris. Thus her brain replaces Berrisford with an image of Harris. Again, I just don't think mental health works that way. There are plenty of times when Cynthia sees Berrisford and he appears normal, not like the burned boogeyman. So how does her brain differentiate?

There's so much about *Bad Dreams* that is worthwhile, from the soundtrack (which includes Guns-n-Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine") to the creepy "documentary"-style interviews with Harris's flock at the beginning of the film. The flashbacks to Unity Field are good and evocative of a bygone era, and the film's cynical attitude about the 1960s and not-much-better 1980s make it a blast, particularly Ruttan's line of dialogue about yeast infections. Even the rubber-reality transitions are handled masterfully, with Cynthia passing (in shackles) from an isolation ward in the hospital to the entrance of Unity Fields, atop a hill. It's splendidly shot.

It's just that the ending is a stinker, and no possible explanation is going to set that right. Harris should have returned from the dead and attacked Cynthia. Sorry.

Critical Reception

“Who knew you could remake a camp classic and be this entertaining about it? (The fact that future screenwriting superstar—if such a creature can be said to exist—Frank Darabont wrote it maybe helped.) I loved that the film kills off characters willy-nilly with no respect for Hollywood rules about who gets to live and who deserves to die and what the proper amount of screen time is before you can let the kindly town sheriff get blobbed. Great stuff.”—MaryAnn Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic (www.flickfilosopher.com)

“This film has a lot of energy and a game cast, and some of the blob attacks are downright inventive (drain, anyone?). It is, however, missing some of the innocent charm of the original. It doesn’t make you forget the original in nearly the same way that Cronenberg made us forget *The Fly*.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kevin Dillon (Brian Flagg); Shawnee Smith (Meg Penny); Donovan Leitch (Paul Taylor); Jeffrey De Munn (Sheriff Herb); Candy Clark (Fran Hewitt); Joe Seneca (Dr. Meddows); Del Close (Reverend Meeker); Paul McCrane (Deputy Briggs); Sharon Spelman (Mrs. Penny); Beau Billingslea (Moss); Art La Fleur (Mr. Penny); Ricky Paull Goldin (Scott); Billy Beck (Can Man); Michael Kenworthy (Kevin Penny); Jack Nance (Doctor); Margaret Smith (Nurse); Erika Eleniak (Vicki de Soto); Daryl Marsh (Lance); Pons Maar (Theatre Manager); Bill Moseley (Soldier).

CREW: Tri-Star Pictures and Andre Blay and Elliott Kastner Present a Chuck Russell Film. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Film Editors:* Terry Stokes, Tod Feuerman. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Production Design:* Craig Stearns. *Music:* Michael Honig. *Makeup Effects designed and created by:* Tony Gardner. *Creature Effects Designed and Created by:* Lyle Conway. *Special Visual Effects by:* Dream Quest Images. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Hoyt Yeatman. *Mechanical Effects:* Frazee and Frazee, Inc. *Visual Effects Production Supervisor:* Michael Fink. *Stunt Coordinators:* Gary Hymes, Steve Holladay. *Costume Designer:* Joseph Porror. *Unit Production Managers:* Gordon World, Daryl Kass. *First Assistant Director:* Josh McLaglen. *Second Assistant Director:* J. Tom Archuleta. *Line Producer:* Rupert Harvey. *Screenplay:* Chuck Russell, Frank Darabont. *Produced by:* Jack H. Harris, Elliott Kastner. *Directed by:* Chuck Russell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A meteor crashes to Earth in the snow-starved,

economically ravaged ski town of Arborville, and a strange pink protoplasm emerges from the crater to attach itself to the hand of a local bum (Beck). Local teens Meg (Smith) and Paul (Leitch) team up with rebel Brian Flagg (Dillon) to take the deranged, suffering old man to the hospital, but the Blob devours him and starts to grow to alarming proportions. Nobody believes Meg's story when the Blob devours Paul, and she seeks the help of Dillon to prove it.

The duo heads up to the mountains and runs across a biological containment team headed by Dr. Meddows (Seneca). They learn that the Blob is actually the latest development in the U.S. Germ Warfare program—a biological weapon—and that the “meteor” that brought it to their town was actually a malfunctioning satellite. Meddows attempts to quarantine the town after the Blob attacks a diner and a movie theater, and Flagg and Meg realize that the secret to destroying it is extreme cold. But before they can destroy the ever-growing Blob, they must rescue Meg's little brother Kevin (Kenworthy) from the movie theater. The Blob pursues all of them into the sewers beneath Arborville, and as the Blob grows, it's time to bring out the heavy artillery. In this case, that means a snow maker!

COMMENTARY: In every conceivable way that could matter (excepting, perhaps, nostalgia), the Chuck Russell 1988 remake of *The Blob* is superior to the 1958 source material that starred Steve McQueen. This remake, released thirty years after the original teen sleeper, features amazing and gory (and non-computer generated) special effects, boasts a smart script, includes surprising twists and turns, and most of all—is utterly merciless.

The Blob is dominated by a series of really terrific and graphic death scenes. The titular mass of protoplasm kills slowly, dissolving and digesting people a bit at a time, which means that it's ... chunky. In one terrific sequence, the Blob envelopes a phone booth, and the glass walls give us a bird's eye view of the Blob innards, where various victims are decaying, mouths hanging agape in terror and pain. It's quite disgusting, and it makes death by Blob a terrifying, revolting prospect.

Also, in this age of CGI, I must pause to reflect that the Blob in this film seems to possess genuine mass and elasticity. Gravity seems to have an effect on it, unlike so many digitally created monsters and creatures of the twenty-first century. *The Blob* reveals just how efficiently and skillfully special effects men could create believable physical effects in the final days before computer mania. Like the creations in John Carpenter's *The Thing*, there's never a moment in *The*

Blob where the audience feels the creature is anything but substantial ... and terrifying.

The Blob opens with a variation on the *Psycho*–Janet Leigh trick. It looks like the film is going to star Donovan Leitch as the hero, a kid named Paul. He's a decent fellow, a football player and he's less obnoxious than his buddies, so it's almost a *fait accompli* that he's going to be the star. Not long into the film, however, Paul is devoured by the Blob in a shocking sequence. It falls from the ceiling of a medical office, lands on him, and digests him a layer at a time. This is not the fate the audience expected. The mantel of hero now falls on big-haired rebel Kevin Dillon and final girl Shawnee Smith.

I'll never forget watching Siskel and Ebert review the movie *Aliens*, and Siskel giving it a thumbs down, because—amongst other reasons—he objected to the fact that Newt, a little kid, was put in severe jeopardy through the film. I always wanted to ask him: Would the movie have been more plausible had the aliens treated Newt differently than human adults? Would that have made sense? Obviously not. But anyway, it's a ridiculous reason to diss a great movie, especially when so many horror films make precisely the opposite mistake: They feature children in prominent roles and the audience always knows that they are going to survive.

Not, my friends, in *The Blob*. The little kid, Eddie—the one who's always listening to his Sony Walkman—gets plucked right off a ladder in the sewer and mauled by the Blob. The film actually depicts him dying, and that totally and utterly rocks. A mass of non-thinking protoplasm isn't going to play favorites. It's going to belly-up to the bar.

Another surprise is that both the kindly sheriff played by Jeffrey De Munn and the waitress played by Candy Clark are also killed. This is a movie that plays no favorites, because the early scenes indicate that their flirtatious, sweet relationship is going to continue. Instead, the film wickedly plays on expectations. Clark's character, Fran, flees a Blob attack and hides in the aforementioned phone booth. She attempts to contact the sheriff, her beau, on the phone, but then—flouting expectations—his still-living body shows up decomposing in the Blob. What a brilliant way to reveal that no help is coming for Fran. She's phoning him, and he's already in the muck. Yuck.

Over and over again, Chuck Russell's re-imagination of the 1958 *Blob* mixes surprise and shocks. This *Blob* isn't even an alien organism, as was the case in the original. Rather, as is discovered in a surprise

revelation, it's a secret government experiment (reflecting, perhaps the country's contemporary unease with the recent Iran-Contra scandal). This is a fun movie that plays on (but doesn't depend on) a familiarity with the original film.

Although this movie wasn't the hit it should have been, it's a wild ride. Shawnee Smith is a machine gun-toting heroine; Kevin Dillon jumps his motorcycle over the Blob; and the kill scenes (including one involving a kitchen sink and drain) are inventive and utterly vicious. Bodies are ripped asunder, digested, dissolved, exploded and even burned, and the final set piece involves some impressive miniatures and stunt work. This is the kind of monster movie that fans live for. It's particularly amusing when the action moves to a movie theater showing a slasher movie called *The Garden Tool Massacre*. "Wait a minute," a character in the movie-within-a-movie says, "hockey season ended months ago..."

Gazing across the slate of 1980s horror, there are a number of outstanding films, but I don't know that there is any (besides, perhaps, *Child's Play*) other than *The Blob* that so consistently and wittily entertains and amuses. It appears to be the perfect crowd-pleaser, though crowds stayed away.

Only two missteps darken this grand, exciting re-do of the 1958 film. The first is *The Blob*'s unnecessary epilogue, a ridiculous hook for a sequel, which involves a deranged man of the cloth (perhaps a reflection of the country's late-1980s obsession with weird televangelists), and also the notation that the cold is the only thing that can kill the Blob. Yet, it's very cold in space, isn't it? And that's where it used to live, right?

Bloodspell (a.k.a. *The Boy from Hell*)



Cast and Crew

CAST: Anthony Jenkins (Daniel); Aarin Teich (Charlie); Alexandra Kennedy (Jenny); Theodora Louise (Debby); John Reno (Luther); Heather Green (Peggy); Christophe G. Venuti (Joe); Susan Buchanan (Mrs. Redding); Douglas Vale (Dr. Nelson); Arthur Alexander (Dr. Moyers); Geri Elkus (Dr. Scott); James English (Fire Chief).

CREW: Vista Street Productions presents a Feifer/Miller Production of

a Deryn Warren Film. *Music*: Randy Miller. *Film Editor*: Tony Miller. *Production Design*: Peter Kanter. *Special Effects Makeup*: Wade Daily. *Director of Photography*: Ronn Schmidt. *Executive Producers*: Jerry Felfer, Tony Miller. *Producer*: Jessica Rains. *Written by*: Gerry Daly. *Directed by*: Deryn Warren. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 86 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I know everyone is depressed, but let’s not dwell on it.”—Some questionable advice to teens with mental illness in *Bloodspell*.

SYNOPSIS: A frantic mother (Buchanan) hides her teenage son Daniel (Jenkins) in a home for disturbed adolescents because her creepy ex-husband Luther (Reno) has made a pact with Satan and needs the boy to perform a ritual of “rejuvenation.” But Luther soon finds the St. Boniface Christian Evaluation Center and takes possession of Daniel, initiating a reign of terror against the other disturbed teenagers. He makes one boy, a bully, choke on a piece of pie, and then sees to it that he dies in a gruesome fashion. Only Charlie (Teich), a much-teased resident at the home, suspects that Daniel is evil and he possesses such powers.

COMMENTARY: *Bloodspell* is yet another representative of the direct-to-video horror glut of the late 1980s, and a bad representative at that. Many of these DTV movies are so bad that they don’t even boast the humble production values of a favorite TV show episode. Furthermore, the acting would make afternoon soap opera stars blush. Worst, the weak direction proves without a doubt that the movie was made to be seen on the square TV set, not displayed in the cinematic rectangle of wide-screen. How cheap is this movie? Well, some exterior shots of the St. Boniface House are actually freeze frames, and worse, the exterior of the house don’t seem to match the interiors.

Still, tell an audience a good story, and a number of stylistic failings or production shortcomings can be forgiven. But nope, *Bloodspell* doesn’t tell an interesting story either, only a derivative one. The movie’s of that late-1980s rubber-reality school, wherein a group of teenagers (always congregated in a claustrophobic setting like a psych ward) are menaced by a supernatural entity. The model for the film’s Satanic servant, Luther, is obviously another bad father, Monsieur Krueger himself, though the body-hopping Luther is not nearly so memorable.

Bloodspell isn’t aided by its recycling of a terrible 1980s cliché. In films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part III: Dream Warriors* and *Bad Dreams*, bizarre murders are implausibly mistaken for accidents. When more than one bizarre crime occurs, the police sees it as nothing but

coincidence ... two accidents. Here, that absurd narrative convention is played out until it seems downright stupid. The authorities here describe the deaths at the Boniface (another “group” setting, also familiar from *Dream Warriors* and *Bad Dreams*) as “a classic case of mass hysteria.” Yeah, right.

Even *Bloodspell*'s climax fails to thrill. Electrocution is the mode of destruction, as lightning strikes a wire and kills the villain right after Daniel obligingly shrieks “God help us.” So the climax of *Bloodspell* is, in fact, the very definition of a *deus ex machina*!

Brain Damage

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“*Basket Case* redux, but still fun. Reflects on the drug culture in many ways, and Henenlotter’s sick sense of humor is always welcome.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

“The ultimate drug awareness resistance education video. *Brain Damage* revolves around a talking slug who hawks alien opiates to an eager teenager. Next thing you know, this boy and his (rather phallic) monster are cruising skid row in search of ... brains. It’s all done with a surprising amount of twisted charm. Due to a virtually non-existent budget, the film looks dark and gritty, but it still has a vibrant, hypnotic energy. More than Frank Henenlotter’s similar films, *Basket Case* and *Frankenhooker*, this captures the adolescent mania of reckless euphoria and fearful solitude.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rick Herbst (Brian); Gordon Macdonald (Mike); Jennifer Lwory (Barbara); Theo Barnes (Morris); Lucille Saint Peter (Martha); Vicki Darnell (Blonde in Hall); Joe Gonzales (Guy in Shower); Bradlee Rhodes (Night Watchman); Michael Bishop (Toilet Victim); Beverly Bonner (Neighbor); Ari Roussimoff (Biker); Michael Rubinstien (Bum in Alley); Angel Figueroa (Junkie); John Reichert, Don Henenlotter (Police); Kevin Van Hentenryck (Man with Basket).

CREW: Palisades Partners presents an Ievins/Henenlotter Production.
Casting: Frank Calo. **Film Editors:** James Y. Kwei, Frank Henenlotter.

Director of Photography: Clutch Reiser. *Special Makeup Effects:* Gabe Bartalos. *Executive Producers:* Andre Blay, Al Eicher. *Producer:* Edgar Ilevnis. *Aylmer/Elmer created by:* Gabe Bartalos, David Kindlon. *Directed by:* Frank Henenlotter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young, upstanding man named Brian (Herbst) awakes from a nap one day to discover that a blue, talking slug named Aylmer has taken up residence in his neck and is injecting a blue chemical into his brain to make him feel high. In return for this burst of euphoria, Aylmer needs Brian to feed him human brains. Brian resists, but the high proves too good, and he finds it impossible to go cold turkey on Aylmer, really a long-lived entity of endless history, whose parasitic antics can be traced back to the Fourth Crusade and the sacking of Byzantium.

COMMENTARY: Since the mid-1980s, the Reagan Administration had been using the catchphrase “Just say no” to win a victory in the War on Drugs. The battle against illegal drugs was of special interest to first lady Nancy Reagan, who held rallies at the White House in 1986 and even appeared on the sitcom *Different Strokes* to tout the administration’s simplistic message. By 1988, the War on Drugs was enshrined in policy, with the creation of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. In 1989, William Bennett—a man who it was later learned suffers from an addiction of his own (namely gambling)—became the nation’s first “drug czar.”

The first thing Bennett should have done was make Frank Henenlotter’s low-budget 1988 effort, *Brain Damage*, required viewing in high schools. Over the years, there have been numerous preachy and syrupy “after school”—type TV dramas about the dangers of illicit drug use and addiction, but sometimes messages like this go down much better with a metaphor, and that seems to be something director Henenlotter understands. Ultimately, *Brain Damage* is a more daring and better-made film than even his classic *Basket Case*, since it works on two levels simultaneously, and never falls into the trap of being overly didactic.

Brian, a fine young fellow, becomes susceptible to the influence of Aylmer (representing an illicit drug). Aylmer is a tiny blue slug with a big brain, and he begins injecting into Brian’s brain toxins that make him feel good. Before long, all Brian cares about is getting another “fix” of this good stuff. “Can you juice me?” he asks desperately at one point. “The colors are starting to fade.”

Aylmer obliges of course, but he wants something from Brian in

return: human brains. The film acts as an allegory for the way that dependence on drugs leads to bad decisions, including murder. At first, Brian's friends don't know what to make of his unusual behavior. "He's a completely different person," his girlfriend and brother complain, but Brian is too high to notice.

In one scene that reveals how the drug induces lethargy and non-action, Brian lies in his bedroom and listens pliantly while his girlfriend moans with pleasure and has sex with his brother, Mike. He would rather get high alone with Aylmer than have sex with his girlfriend; he'd rather not address a betrayal. His sex drive fails, replaced by the drive to get high, a point which is again hammered home when a girl offers to perform oral sex on him, noticing that "it feels like" he's got a "real monster" in his crotch. As she unzips his pants, a phallus-shaped Aylmer pops out and kills the girl, again dramatizing how the sex drive has been replaced by the drug high.

Brain Damage also acknowledges the difficulty of kicking drugs in a scene that finds Brian attempting to go cold turkey. He vomits and grows increasingly sick, but that inner voice telling him to go back to drugs is externalized here, as Aylmer's. Aylmer is literally the monkey on his back. Eventually, Brian comes begging to Aylmer for a fix, and the audience understands that no rehabilitation is possible.

When Barbara, Brian's girlfriend, eventually succumbs to Aylmer's eating habits, *Brain Damage* makes another thinly veiled attack on drugs and addiction. The addict ends up hurting the ones he loves. Those who are closest to him will be the ones who suffer.

Not that Brian (a name very similar to Brain, notice) doesn't suffer. He goes from being a yuppie in a suit and tie to a drug addict wearing a sweaty wife-beater and inhabiting a sleazy hotel room. But then, Henenlotter is the master when it comes to depicting seedy, urban hotel rooms. Right down to the oddly communal showers.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *Brain Damage* is the notion that drug addiction is the great equalizer. It crosses racial and social barriers and makes every human animal behave the same way. For instance, at a punk night club called Hell, Brian is depicted on the dance floor grooving in his suit and tie. The people around him sport mowhawks and black leather. And, even the kindly old neighbors, an elderly couple, are twisted by their association with the addictive Aylmer. They arm themselves with a gun and attempt to kill Brian to get him back. This is a particularly potent message, because what *Brain Damage* says isn't "teens can't handle drugs," a condescending,

patronizing message. What it actually says is that no one can handle drugs.

Henenlotter is a Hollywood outsider, a renegade filmmaker, so this isn't any kind of message film, and it doesn't boast a happy ending (how many addict stories do?). It's a sister piece, in fact, to eighties cinema such as *Sid and Nancy* (1986) in that at the same time it reveals how drugs destroy relationships, bodies and minds, they nonetheless possess some kind of strange allure. "I see things differently now," Brian notes, glazed. "Sometimes everything glows."

Conservative Hollywood wouldn't necessarily approve that message of psychedelic euphoria going out in theaters, nor would it approve of Henenlotter's extremely graphic and horrific images. For instance, there's a disgusting image featuring a human brain amongst a bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. And then there's the moment when Brian hallucinates that he's picking his brains out ... and his ear falls off. Or the disgusting and very wet death on the toilet seat. This film is explicit and nasty, and also fun, since Aylmer is such a jolly monster, even given to singing his own signature tune.

Teenagers would probably watch a "just say no"-type anti-drug movie and laugh their asses off at the sincerity and solemnity of the material. Believe me, they wouldn't laugh at the horrifying *Brain Damage*, a film that not only handles such material responsibly, but artistically.

Cellar Dweller

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Deborah Mullowney (Whitney Taylor); Brian Robbins (Phillip); Vince Edwards (George); Cheryl-Ann Wilson (Lisa); Jeffrey Combs (Colin Childress); Pamela Bellwood (Amanda); Yvonne De Carlo (Mrs. Briggs); Floyd Levine (Taxi Driver); Michael S. Deak (Cellar Dweller).

CREW: Empire Pictures Presents a Dove Corporation Ltd., Production of a John Buechler Film. *Casting:* Anthony Barnao. *Art Director:* Angelo Santucci. *Music:* Carl Dance. *Film Editor:* Barry Zettin. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Roberto Bessi. *Director of Photography:* Sergio Saluaci. *Special Effects:* John Buechler and MMI., Inc. *Written by:* Kit Du Bois. *Producer:* Bob Wynn. *Directed by:* John Carl Buechler. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 78 minutes.

INCANTATION: “To contemplate evil is to ask evil home.”—An interesting (and conservative) viewpoint espoused by *Cellar Dweller*.

SYNOPSIS: Comic-artist Colin Childress (Combs) brings to life a monster from his book, *Cellar Dweller*, and dies trying to destroy the beast. Thirty years later, a fan of Childress’s work, Whitney (Mullowney), attends an art institute in his very house, which is run by the snobby and secretive Mrs. Briggs (De Carlo). Whitney takes over Childress’s basement art studio and begins creating a new, monstrous issue of *Cellar Dweller*, using the artist’s leather-bound demon book as a guide.

COMMENTARY: “Not all modern art is populist tripe,” declares Yvonne De Carlo’s character, Mrs. Briggs, in the low-budget *Cellar Dweller*. In this John Buechler film from Empire, a hot young art student named Whitney would likely agree. She finds considerable value in comic book art. As would most horror movie admirers. Comics and horror cinema often co-exist so easily because both involve the composition in “frames” (or panels, to use the correct lingo) and, more importantly, both have often been dismissed by snobby academics as vulgar arts.

The crux of *Cellar Dweller*, however, is the wholly conservative notion that if a person contemplates evil, or to put it another way, lets evil into his heart, then said person has “asked it home.” Thus the artist Colin Childress (played with gleamy-eyed insanity by Jeffrey Combs), by creating his “evil” comic book, sealed his own doom. Furthermore, by resurrecting it, Whitney is repeating his mistake.

So *Cellar Dweller* seems to invoke the old horror movie trope “Don’t tamper in God’s domain,” because if you do, you might be confronted with a demon. The only answer, as the movie details, is to leave behind such fascination in the occult, draw “a happy ending,” and literally use white-out to eliminate the artistry that inspired the “evil” in the first place. *Cellar Dweller* could be the first horror movie to actually advocate the destruction of art to keep “bad things” from entering the pop culture.

Not that any critic could think *Cellar Dweller* seriously meant to make such a social statement. It’s just that a careful reading of the film suggests this interpretation. On the other hand, *Cellar Dweller* also revels in some beautiful comic-book depictions of the demonic murders as they are occurring. This jump to the comic-book panels grants the violence in the film a certain charm and artistry, all while appearing at odds with the film’s overall thesis, which, to paraphrase

the screenplay, is this: “Woe unto you who should give this beast form.” In other word, just think good, clean thoughts, okay?

Again, don’t think for a moment that *Cellar Dweller* intended this pro-censorship message. The film isn’t skilled or intelligent enough to present a coherent, cohesive vision. To wit, at other points in *Cellar Dweller*, the makers seem to understand that comic books and horror movies can serve as a “constructive way” of dealing with an “author’s aggression,” noting the cathartic qualities of these arts. So the message is really and truly mixed.

It’s baffling that Empire Pictures productions are so bad and so unskilled. Empire is clearly a company that understands, admires and loves the horror genre. Ditto with the director, John Carl Buechler. Yet so many Empire productions (like *Cellar Dweller*) dance on the knife’s edge between mediocrity and stupidity.

Cellar Dweller’s primary assets are cult stars Combs and De Carlo and the neat comic-book panel depictions of the demon attacks. The deficits include the special effects (especially the monster itself), the unconvincing production values (such as the cheapskate sets), weak performances by an undistinguished group of youngsters, and a diffident script that cannot decide if it wants to champion comic book art (not all of it is “populist tripe”) or advocate its destruction.

Child’s Play

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“*Child’s Play* stands out from the latest pack of horror flicks because it proves that horror movies do not have to be inane. The acting is good. The plot is interesting. The characters have common sense. And the villain has a nasty sense of humor.”—Robin D. Givhan, “*Child’s Play* Is Clever Horror,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 10, 1988, page 7B.

“However unintentionally comic it is to see adults terrified by a knife-wielding doll, *Child’s Play* at times has the serious creepiness of the *Poltergeist* series.”—Carrie Rickey, “A Doll That Walks and Talks And Has a Serial Killer’s Soul,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 9, 1988, page E04.

“As with most exercises in terror, *Child’s Play* is scariest when much is left to the imagination. It ranks right there with goose bump classics

when it sticks to Karen's cramped apartment and all we hear are the muffled sound of little sneakers on hardwood floors.”—Glenn Lovell, “Director Toys with Our Minds in Nicely Understated Child’s Play; Imagination Breeds Terror,” *The San Jose Mercury News*, November 9, 1988, page 7D.

“[R]arely has a schlock story like this been told so well. For one thing, the storyline actually makes sense ... and the actors in *Child’s Play* take their work seriously ... [T]he Chucky doll is one of those marvels of modern day special effects: It walks, it talks, it spews obscenities ... The picture is legitimately creepy...”—Lewis Beale, “Tale of a Dastardly Doll Makes for Some Slick Schlock in *Child’s Play*,” *Daily News of Los Angeles*, November 9, 1988, page L19.

“Brad Dourif just adds so much to everything he does. Even voicing a doll, Dourif manages to always give Chucky a little more than the average killer doll. Worthy of spawning a series, although amazingly, the early sequels weren’t all that special—it’s later on, when Jennifer Tilly would come into the picture, that things would get interesting. This first film was entertaining enough, nothing wonderful, but a stable enough foundation to build on.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

“Chucky drove a stake in the evil doll trope. May all serial killers be able to find such a cute little receptacle for their tortured souls.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Catherine Hicks (Karen Barkley); Chris Sarandon (Detective Mike Norris); Alex Vincent (Andy Barkley); Brad Dourif (Charles Lee Ray/Chucky); Dinah Manoff (Maggie Peterson); Tommy Swerdlow (Santos); Jack Colvin (Dr. Ardmore); Neil Giuntoli (Eddie Caputo); Juan Ramirez (Peddler); Alan Wilder (Mr. Criswell); Aaron Osborne (Orderly).

CREW: United Artists Presents a David Kirschner Production of a Tom Holland film. *Casting:* Richard Pagano, Sharon Bialy. *Associate Producer:* Laura Moskowitz. *Costume Designer:* April Ferry. *Music:* Joe Renzetti. *Film Editors:* Edward Warschilka, Roy E. Peterson. *Production Designer:* Daniel A. Lomino. *Director of Photography:* Bill Butler. *Executive Producer:* Barrie M. Osborne. *Story:* Dan Mancini. *Produced by:* David Kirschner. *Written by:* Don Mancini, John Lafia, Tom Holland. *Directed by:* Tom Holland. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When cornered in a toy store by Detective Mike Norris (Sarandon), Charles Lee Ray (Dourif), the Lake Shore Strangler, uses his voodoo magic to transfer his soul into the body of a Good Guys Doll named Chucky. Financially strapped department store worker, Mrs. Barkley (Hicks) buys the Chucky Doll from a peddler, hoping to please her Good Guys-obsessed son, Andy (Vincent) on his birthday. The lively Chucky soon kills Andy's babysitter (Peterson) and drags the child on his quest for revenge, going after his treacherous accomplice, Eddie Caputo (Giuntoli).

Because he has been found at the scene of two murders, little Andy is taken to an asylum while his distraught mother learns that Chucky really and truly lives. As Karen tries to convince Norris about the evil doll, Chucky learns from a voodoo master that he can escape the doll's body by transferring it to the first person he told his "secret" to. That's Andy.

COMMENTARY: During the Christmas season of 1983, middle America spontaneously went mad for a fad. 'Twas the season of Coleco's Cabbage Patch Doll, a collectible figure that turned an ugly plush doll into a new rage and the latest "must have" sign of status. Invented in the late 1970s by a gentleman living in Georgia, the Cabbage Patch Dolls were mass-marketed by Coleco beginning in 1982, and these little soft baby dolls each bore an individual look, specific name and even a detailed birth certificate.

For some reason, these so-ugly-they're-cute dolls struck a deep national nerve and countless kids wanted one ... fanatically. Which was a concern, because there simply wasn't enough supply to meet the demand in time for the holidays. The paucity of genuine Cabbage Patch Dolls resulted in long lines at mobbed toy stores and fistfights between parents over the last doll on a given shelf. On some occasions, police were called in to quell altercations that threatened to erupt into full-scale riots. Yes, the young adults of the 1960s who had marched for civil rights and protested against the Vietnam War were now rioting to possess toys for their indulged children.

Black market Cabbage Patch dolls were created to feed the frenzy, and independent peddlers sold their supplies at outrageously inflated prices. By 1985, the Cabbage Patch Dolls were a half-a-billion dollar industry for manufacturer Coleco, and supply had at last come to meet demand.

Like most trends, the Cabbage Patch Craze burned itself out in relatively short order and by 1988, Coleco went bankrupt. Yet the

final nail in the coffin for the Cabbage Patch Kids wasn't the bankruptcy, or even the parody of them, the Garbage Pail Kids. No, it may very well have been the 1988 horror film, *Child's Play*, concerning a Good Guys Doll coming to life, murdering people and threatening young children, that killed this beast. In the film, consumerism-run-amok returned to biteuppies in the ass, and Chucky had sharp teeth.

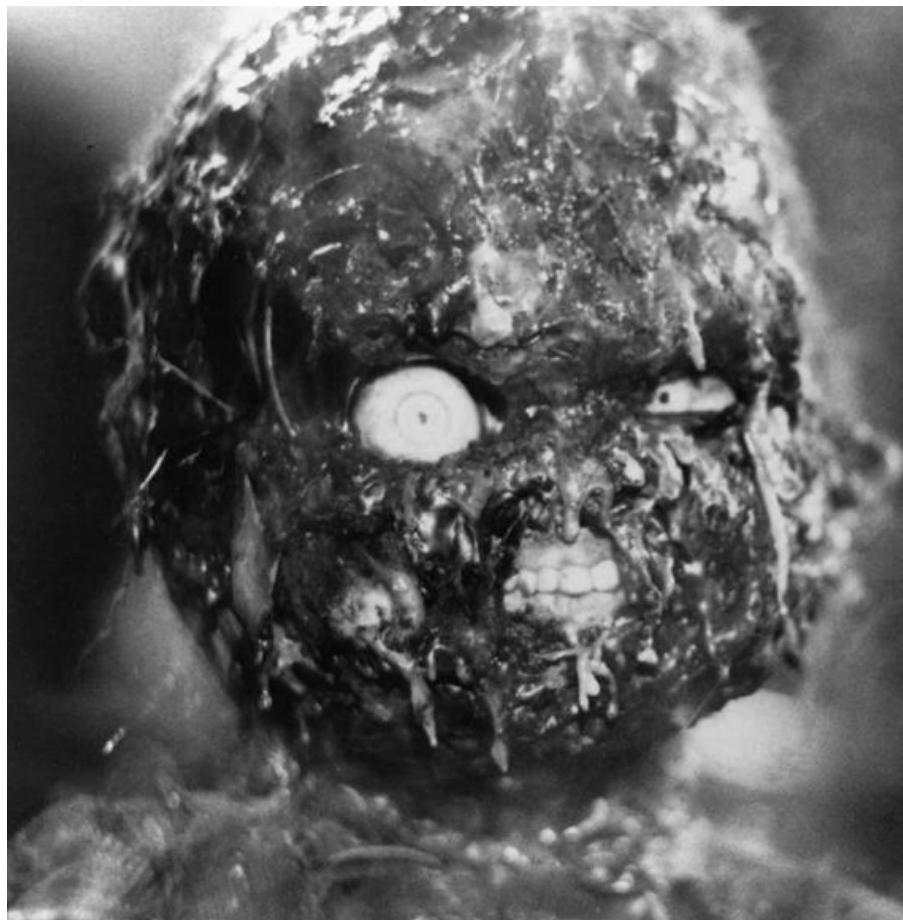
In addition to being a rip-roaring, energetic horror movie, *Child's Play* is an admirable and artistic film because it so delightfully rips the consumer culture of the late 1980s (and today), and ably points out how marketers target children in every way, shape and form imaginable. And then, in this evil cycle, children target parents, nagging them until they get what they want.

Early in the film, for instance, Andy is seated before a television watching a *Good Guys* TV show. Yes, in the 1980s merchandise actually had its own TV programs to sell themselves (Smurfs, G.I. Joe, He-Man, Thundercats and My Little Pony among them). This television production comes replete with a Good Guys Doll catchphrase, "I'll be your friend till the end!" and an insipid but catchy theme song. But that's not enough: Commercial breaks feature adverts for the Good Guys product line, which also includes a sugary breakfast cereal and clothing. Andy is depicted wearing Good Guy overalls, pajamas, and sneakers, and playing with a Good Guys work-tool bench. This is one kid, the movie realizes, who has drunk the Kool Aid. The marketing of the Good Guys on television has made the poor child a slave to consumerism.

Andy must ... have ... it ... all. He's nobody and nothing without his Good Guys brand name merchandise, and the movie makes a wicked point of this commercial lure by having the evil Chucky—the very thing that Andy wanted so badly—drop down through the chimney and fireplace to menace the child at film's end. Chucky's arrival in this fashion is surely the anti-Santa Claus arrival: He comes down the chimney bringing death and destruction, and it's an up-shot of Andy's compulsion to own *everything* with a Good Guy label. Now he has his own, personal Good Guy serial killer! (Available soon at a toy store near you!)

Unfortunately for Andy, his mom is a single woman, working in retail, and she just doesn't have the money to buy her son the Good Guys Dolls. This reflects reality, because in the 1980s, Cabbage Patch Dolls sold for forty and fifty dollars apiece, which automatically made them the chosen toy of the well-to-do. But more relevantly, the dolls are in

short supply. Poor Karen Barkley is a low-paid “slave” in retail and must cough up 100 dollars for her Good Guy doll, going so far as to purchase him from an untrustworthy “other,” a homeless peddler.



A seared, melting Chucky still has a little juice left in him for one last sting-in-the tale/tail.

The point that *Child's Play* makes here and throughout is actually an economic one. Middle-class parents in the 1980s spend their hard-earned cash on indulgent things while people across America live in poverty and are homeless. Later in the film, Karen goes in search of the homeless man and visits a neighborhood that, according to Norris, “isn’t a good part of town to be at” late at night. What she finds is a gaggle of homeless huddled around garbage can fires in the cold night

air.

Consider also that whenever *Child's Play* leaves Karen's middle class neighborhood, the surrounding areas (like Eddie Caputo's house) resemble bombed-out neighborhoods. The houses are in ruins, the victim of urban blight. The underlying message is that a craze like Good Guys or Cabbage Patch is a diversion in an America that needs to feed the hungry; house the poor and lift people out of poverty. Those priorities were not Reagan's priorities in a business-obsessed 1980s, but *Child's Play* recognizes them, and posits a situation wherein the fruits of rampant consumerism (in this case, an evil doll) come back to attack the middle class.

Child's Play is also quite funny, by the way, in the manner it directly references the Cabbage Patch Dolls. In one classic scene, a lady in an elevator makes the comment (regarding Chucky) that he is an ugly doll. This was indeed the very rap against the Cabbage Patch Kids! Chucky offers a classic rejoinder, in a sing-song tone that only the great Brad Dourif could muster: "Fuck you."

A social subtext or underpinning is always commendable in a horror film, but *Child's Play*'s horror credits are unimpeachable. Director Tom Holland, fresh from the triumph of *Fright Night* (1985), wisely holds back on revealing Chucky's true nature till well into the proceedings. P.O.V. stalk shots substitute for Chucky's perspective, and many times, Andy is simply seen carrying the limp doll. In any given scene early in the film, Chucky's position may change, but the audience doesn't actually see him move, which heightens suspense. The doll—an amazing and expressive creation—doesn't come to horrifying life until a terrific scene set at night in the Barkley apartment. Karen is upset because Andy has been taken to the hospital, and—desperate for anything to latch onto—she checks Chucky's box. A package of sealed batteries fall to the floor.

The audience and Karen reach the same conclusion at the same time. Chucky has been operating for days without batteries. Bewildered, but not yet frightened, Karen approaches Chucky and picks him up. She turns him over slowly, mindful for any signs of life, and then lifts the cover on the battery compartment. Suddenly, as if in imitation of Linda Blair, Chucky's head spins all the way around and addresses her. Terrified, Karen drops the doll and it rolls under a sofa.

Suddenly, all is silent. Was this an anomaly? Should Karen believe her eyes? She lowers her head down to the sofa, and the camera detects Chucky there, still. Just a piece of plastic, right? She drags him out

and Chucky springs to violent life. His little plastic face has been transformed by utter hatred and he starts to attack Karen like a mad dog. The staging, acting and special effects in this sequence are spot-on perfect, and the rest of the film is a roller coaster ride.

Child's Play works so well, and strikes all the right horror notes because it is funny and sharply conceived as an attack on consumerism and a popular eighties trend, but more so because the script has been structured in a “boy who cried wolf” fashion. Nobody believes little Andy when he says his Chucky doll is alive, and this kid—not unlike Danielle Harris in *Halloween IV* and *V*—goes through hell in this movie. It’s rewarding when Andy, finally getting smart, defends himself and goes head-to-head with Chucky. Of course, Chucky knocks Andy out with a baseball bat, but still ... it’s nice to see the kid get in his licks.

Child's Play is about so much more than the universal fear we humans share about dolls, those hunks of plastic that eerily resemble the living. Although *Child's Play* exploits this fear successfully, it’s really about 1980s culture, and about characters the audience sympathizes with. The sequels are not in the same class, because what they mostly concern is a doll on the loose killing people. There’s no ambiguity in the sequels (as there is in *Child's Play*), no buildup to the big reveal, and no truly human characters to sympathize with. That’s why *Child's Play* is in a class by itself.

LEGACY: *Child's Play* spawned three sequels in the 1990s. The first two, *Child's Play 2* (1990) and *Child's Play 3* (1991) found Chucky continuing his hunt for Andy. *Bride of Chucky* (1998), a fresh start, found Chucky falling in love with a female doll, given voice by Jennifer Tilly. The latest installment, *Seed of Chucky* (2005) added another member to the Good Guys family and played as a satire of Hollywood. Suffice it to say that, good or bad, none of these sequels are as frightening—or as timely—as Tom Holland’s original.

Critters 2: The Main Course

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Scott Grimes (Brad Brown); Liane Curtis (Megan Morgan); Don Opper (Charlie); Barry Corbin (Sheriff Harve); Tom Hodges (Wesley); Sam Anderson (Mr. Morgan); Lin Shaye (Sal); Herta Ware (Nana);

Lindsay Parker (Cindy); Terrence Mann (Ug); Cynthia Garris (Zanti); Douglas Rowe (Quigley); Eddie Deezen (Hungry Heifer Manager); Frank Birney (Reverend Fisher); David Ursin (Sheriff Cowin); Roxanne Kernohan (Lee); Gregory Patrick (Nothing Face); Tom McLoughlin (Church Guard).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a Sho Films Production. *Casting*: Robin Lippin. *Production Design*: Philip Dean Foreman. *Music*: Nicholas Pike. *Film Editor*: Charles Bornstein. *Director of Photography*: Russell Carpenter. *Critters created by*: Chiodo Brothers Productions. *Visual Effects*: VCE, Peter Kuran. *Stunt Coordinator*: Dan Bradley. *Executive Producer*: Robert Shaye. *Produced by*: Barry Opper. *Written by*: D.T. Twohy, Mick Garris. *Directed by*: Mick Garris. *MPAA Rating*: PG-13. *Running time*: 88 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Who you gonna call? Critter busters?”—A pop culture reference to *Ghostbusters* (1984) in *Critters 2*.

SYNOPSIS: Two alien bounty hunters and Charlie (Opper) return to Earth when their employer withholds payment on their last job because there is residual Crite activity remaining there. At the same time, young Bradley Brown (Grimes)—who survived the first attack by the furry, hungry Crites—returns to tiny Grover’s Bend to see his granny. Meanwhile, a couple of unscrupulous collectors swipe a nest of Crite eggs from the old Brown barn and sell them as Easter eggs for an upcoming holiday hunt. Before long, the Crites hatch again and start running rampant through town. Sheriff Harve’s (Corbin) help is needed, but he’s reluctant to return to duty after the way the town treated him following the last attack of Critters.

COMMENTARY: There’s nothing really wrong or hideous about *Critters 2: The Main Course*, an ably directed, enjoyable, good-humored PG-13 romp, but it’s not going to top anybody’s ten-best list, either. Most of the movie consists of new and amusing Critter-oriented gags. In one circumstance, a critter bites down onto a truck’s tire and promptly inflates. In another, a critter in a refrigerator finds a green salad and disapproves (because they’re all carnivores, get it?).

The best sequence involves the Critter attack on a fast food restaurant (managed by Eddie Deezen!), as the hungry monsters head for the All You Can Eat Buffet. Before the day is over, one critter has ended up in the deep fryer. And on and on it goes: Critters eating a dog ... Critters rolling through open fields like malevolent tumble weeds ... even a huge Critter ball.

Mick Garris also pauses to enjoy his other non-human characters, the bounty hunters. Fans of the first film may recall that one of the “Nothing Face” aliens had a difficult time settling on what form he would like to adopt. That crisis is rectified in *Critters 2* when the shape-shifter transforms into a gorgeous *Playboy* centerfold, one replete with a large staple in her stomach. That’s a cute joke, and the movie is cute more than anything else. A scene in which the same bounty hunter heads to a video store and nearly transforms into Freddy Krueger also evokes a grin, if nothing else.

Some of the fun gets taken out of the proceedings because a major character dies, and it looks like another is going to bite the dust. Then it all ends relatively happy—but still leaving room for the inevitable *Critters 3*. The only question for director Mick Garris is, why wait twenty-three minutes into *Critters 2* (a movie that lasts a sparse eighty-eight minutes) before staging the first Critter attack? Doubtless anybody interested in *Critters 2* had seen the original and knew what to expect (and the nature of the Crites). No sense beating around the bush here. Just bring on the little evil fuzz balls already!

LEGACY: The 1990s brought two more films in this franchise, *Critters 3: You Are What They Eat* (1991) and *Critters 4* (1992).

Dead Ringers

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Cronenberg reverts to form. That’s not necessarily a good thing. Probably the best warped identical twin gynecologist psychosis film out there. It’s probably good that we have a filmmaker who feels compelled to play with a scary theme like the merging of living things with tools, but David, come back to us, we get the point, and we miss you.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster*, *Eternity Unbound*.

“Gynecology will never be the same. This film is disturbing at every level and is worth a second and third viewing, with Jeremy Irons serving up double deviance. Hopefully you won’t recognize too much of yourself in the characters.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeremy Irons (Elliot/Beverly Mantle); Genevieve Bujold (Claire); Heidi Von Palleske (Cary); Barbara Gordon (Danuta); Shirley

Douglas (Laura); Stephen Lack (Wolleck); Nick Nichols (Leo); Lynne Cormack (Arlene); Miriam Newhouse (Mrs. Bookman); David Hughes (Superintendent); Jonathan Haley (Bev, Age 9); Nicholas Haley (Elliot, Age 9).

CREW: James G. Robinson and Joe Roth Present a David Cronenberg Film. *Casting:* Deirdre Bowen. *Costume Designer:* Denise Cronenberg. *Film Editor:* Ronald Sanders. *Production Designer:* Carol Spier. *Music:* Howard Shore. *Director of Photography:* Peter Suschitzky. *Executive Producers:* Carol Baum, Sylvio Tabet. *Associate Producer:* Joan Board. *Based on the book "Twins" by:* Bari Wood, Jack Geasland. *Written by:* David Cronenberg, Norman Snider. *Produced by:* David Cronenberg, Marc Boyman. *Directed by:* David Cronenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 115 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Identical twins Elliot and Bev Mantle (both played by Irons) share a gynecology practice in Toronto, and are well-known in the industry for their advances in instrumentation, such as the famous “Mantle Retractor.” Movie star Claire Niveau (Bujold) visits the practice in hopes of becoming fertile, only to learn she has a “tri-fold” uterus. Both Mantle brothers romance the celebrity, though she thinks she is only seeing Elliot, the more suave of the twins. When the relationship begins to fail, a rift among the twins grows wider and drugs enter the picture. Soon, both Mantle brothers are spiraling out of control, heading to an inglorious and tragic end.

COMMENTARY: Fans expecting another mainstream Cronenberg film in the vein of the crowd-pleasing *The Fly* (1986) were sorely disappointed after viewing the director’s 1988 follow-up, the icy and remote *Dead Ringers*. However, a movie shouldn’t be judged by audience expectations or by what, in fact, it is not (in this case, mainstream entertainment). Taken on its own terms, *Dead Ringers* is a fine, contemplative psychological horror that meditates on the concept of identity, or rather *co-dependence*, since the Mantle brothers are obsessed with another to the exclusion of all others.

Because they are close—physically and emotionally—to each other, the Mantles are cut off from the rest of the world, unable to empathize or grasp the essential humanity of their peers. This movie is just what one character says it is, “The Mantle Family Saga,” and anything that gets in the way of that is a threat. The brothers, though attracted to Claire, clearly view her as a threat. In one dream sequence, Elliot and Beverly are joined by a slimy, spider-like organic umbilical cord, a visualization of their connection. But in the same dream, Claire appears and separates them by biting through the connective flesh,

again pointing out that any connection outside the twin cathexis is a danger to be avoided.

The intrinsic self-obsession and co-dependence of the Mantle brothers is clear from the opening credits, wherein Cronenberg's camera captures odd, arcane-looking gynecological instruments they've designed. These look more like torture devices than medical instruments, and sure enough, at Cambridge in 1967, an instructor tells them that such bizarre devices are fine "for a cadaver," but not living beings. The instructor doesn't understand that Elliot and Bev have no empathy, compassion or sympathy for other beings ... particularly women. Women are the ultimate mystery to them, which is why they build these odd devices to probe and fish around inside them, to see what makes them tick. In a scene set in 1954, the young teens discuss sex, and ask a little girl to make love to them. There is knowledge there the Mantles are desperate to understand, and when the little girl refuses, the next scene depicts them practicing surgery on a Visible Woman model kit. If they can't know women emotionally, they will know them biologically.

As the Mantles grow up, they enter a business where they spend every day "slaving over hot snatches," as Beverly describes gynecology, a job opportunity that fits their antisocial tendencies. "The beauty of this business," one says, "is that you don't have to get out to meet beautiful women." Indeed, that would be an impossibility given the Mantles' self-absorption.

As the brothers harbor affections for Claire, particularly Bev, and Elliot starts to make advances in his career, accepting a promotion to associate professor, the brothers' perfect front of togetherness is further threatened. When drugs become part of the story, they take out the "fear of separation" on their patients—again, women. Beverly begins to develop even stranger, more invasive gynecological tools, ones designed for surgery on mutant women. This is how he views the opposite sex, as somehow twisted and mutated. After Bev is rough, dismissive and rude with a patient in his office, he complains that "the woman's body was all wrong." Again, he can't relate to women, the powerful bond with his twin precludes it. They both realize, too, that what happens to one shall happen to the other, as in the case of Chang and Ing, Siamese twins who died upon separation. Each of the Mantles is half a person, and each brother knows that. "Whatever goes into his bloodstream goes directly to mine," one says. "The truth is, no one can tell us apart," complains Elliot. "We are perceived as one person."

Dead Ringers charts the dissolution of the brothers as each Mantle

brother functions as a kind of anchor for the other one. And I don't mean anchor as in point of steadiness, but as a literal weight. Elliot pulls Beverly closer to the abyss, down and down. And Beverly returns the favor. They so fear the separation of their gestalt ("Separation can be a terrifying thing") that they degenerate into a life of drug abuse and filth. Ultimately, they die together because it is better for them to be dead than imagine a life with Claire, one in which their "better half" has a reduced importance.

As this analysis reveals, *Dead Ringers* is neither a fun nor lightweight film. It's complex psychologically, and grim, even depressing in depicting the decline of the brothers. Their inner deviance is reflected by the very devices they create, and Irons does a splendid job portraying both roles. His performance is particularly accomplished since a close watching of the film reveals "which" personality he is at any particular point. There is almost no confusion about that, and this alone is amazing.

Still, plumbing the twisted depths of a pair of twins' sexual perversion is hardly the stuff of mainstream entertainment, and one wishes Cronenberg had avoided the title *Dead Ringers*. That moniker makes the movie sound as though it is a pulpy B movie horror film about evil twins, and nothing could be further from the truth. There is no "evil" twin in this film, just two very sick brothers afraid to face the world without one another, yet wanting to reach out to those aliens in their midst—women.

Cronenberg boasts a singular style and intellect, and all his films harbor an obsession with the flesh. How it can be twisted and corrupted (*The Fly*); how it can be evolved (*Videodrome* [1983]); even the ways to shatter it (*Scanners* [1981]). *Dead Ringers* may also be viewed in light of that obsession. It's a cold and clinical film, yet strangely organic. There's something dispassionate about the characters, and yet often the film's color scheme is bathed in blood red. It's almost as though the director is taking the Mantle Retractor to the audience, and forcing us to watch and learn as he pries apart the human psychology to see what makes us tick. The procedure hurts, and it's uncomfortable, but maybe there's something to find deep inside.

The Deceivers

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Pierce Brosnan (Captain William Savage); Shashi Kapoor (Chandra Singh); Saeed Jaffrey (Hussein); Helena Mitchell (Sarah Wilson); Keith Michell (Colonel); David Robb (George Anglesmith); Tariq Yunus (Feringeen); Neena Gupta (The Widow); Bidaya Jena (Harlot).

CREW: Merchant Ivory Productions in association with Michael White and Cinecom and Film Four International Present. *Associate Producer:* Leon Falk. *Costume Designers:* Jenny Beavan, John Bright. *Director of Photography:* Walter Lassally. *Film Editor:* Richard Trevor. *Music:* John Scott. *Executive Producer:* Michael White. *Based on the novel by:* John Masters. *Screenplay by:* Michael Hirst. *Produced by:* Ismail Merchant. *Directed by:* Nicholas Meyer. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

INCANTATION: “This is the story of a secret society of murderers ... and the man who exposed their crimes. It is based on fact.”

SYNOPSIS: In 1825 India, a good Christian colonial supervisor in the British Army, Captain William Savage (Brosnan), agrees to masquerade as the husband of a grieving wife so her family won't permit her to commit suicide over her spouse's lengthy absence. But by dark of night, Savage spies a massacre in the forest, conducted by a vicious local cult known as the Thuggee. Members of this Kali-worshiping gang attack travelers and strangle and gut their victims in ritualistic fashion. After capturing several of the Thuggee, Savage befriends and reforms one of them, a man named Hussein (Jaffrey). Hussein agrees to take Savage deep undercover in the cult of Kali to expose the murderers, the so-called “deceivers,” who are believed responsible for more than two million brutal deaths in India. But once inside the cult, Savage finds his faith tested, especially after he tastes Kali's treasures. Always in danger of being exposed, Savage must make a choice about his future when Hussein is exposed and Savage is ordered to strangle him before the other members of the cult.

COMMENTARY: Perhaps not a horror film in the most conventional sense, this Merchant Ivory period production nonetheless is a good old-fashioned “heart of darkness” story, a 19th century *Donnie Brasco*, in which a good man loses himself and his identity to a cult that captures his imagination, his allegiance, and almost his soul.

In this case, that cult is called the Thuggee, also depicted 1939's *Gunga Din* and in 1984's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The

Thuggee appear suddenly out of darkness and kill without mercy. The film's first scene establishes the horror, as a lone British soldier comes face-to-face with the terror after awaking to find his compatriots murdered. The fade-out leading to the credits lingers on the unfortunate soldier's bulging eyeballs and gaping mouth as he is choked to death. It's a frightening moment, and here's yet another example of "a stranger in a strange land" premise or trope, wherein Western and Eastern cultures clash over religion, the relative value of human life and the like.

Making the comparison explicit, one of the Thuggee religious rituals portrayed in the film involves incense, a penitent pose among the practitioners, and the tasting of sugar cubes (rather than Communion wafers). The director, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*'s (1982) Nicholas Meyer, makes the most out of the moment by letting the audience pick up on the similarity themselves. It's clear in the staging that there's very little difference, at least in this particular rite, between Christianity and the Thuggee, but he doesn't make the fact trite or clichéd by drawing attention to it with dialogue. Christians don't terrorize people, you say? Of course, that's not strictly true, since the Westerners (Brits) in this film occupy and subjugate India's men and women in the colonizing of that country. And, as the film makes clear, some Brits take bribes to look the other way regarding the Thuggee, and others simply don't want to get involved. Instead, they'd rather just keep taking India's treasures and keeping the people in poverty and ignorance.

Where *The Deceivers* works best is in Brosnan's steady decline into barbarism as he becomes as fanatical as the Thuggee. He strangles a man with his bare hands when his identity is threatened. He takes drugs, and—though he is married—makes love to a beautiful harlot who has been given to him for the night. This love-making scene is one of the film's best, and trippiest. During the act, the harlot transforms first into Brosnan's virginal love, Sarah, then into the widow whom Brosnan first hoped to protect in an act of Good Samaritanism. But her real identity is made clear when director Meyer cuts to the shadows on the wall. Brosnan and his lover are seen intertwined there ... and an extra set of hands grasp his torso. In other words, he is making love to the six-armed goddess, Kali, herself.

More intellectual than scary, *The Deceivers* remains an artful, challenging film, one that makes its point visually rather than attempting to score points through words in a screenplay. For instance, at the film's opening, Brosnan's character hunts a wounded tiger in the brush. By the film's end, it is he who is hunted in the

brush, also wounded, also desperate. The point, never reinforced through hokey dialogue, is that Brosnan's character Savage—as his name indicates—has lapsed into animal barbarism by killing with his bare hands ... and liking it. He is literally an animal. Savage even attempts to strangle a child. That's the low point of his soul. It is in that act that he realizes he has forsaken his humanity, and attempts to reclaim it.

Nicholas Meyer has contributed wonderful films to the genre, including *Time After Time* (1979), and *The Deceivers* represents some of his most artful, most restrained cinematic work. The climax, in which a cavalry literally rides over the hill at precisely the right moment to save the captain, is the film's only weakness, though at times it's also a bit lugubrious and slow paced, especially if one goes in expecting an action-thriller. This isn't *James Bond and the Temple of Doom*; more like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Wicker Man*.

Freeway

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Darlanne Fluegel (Sarah “Sunny” Harper); James Russo (Frank Quinn); Michael Callan (Lt. Boyle); Richard Belzer (“Doctor D”); Billy Drago (Heller); Clint Howard (Ronnie); Joey Palese (Detective Gomez); Steven Franken (Lawyer); Brian Kaiser (Morrie); Kenneth Tobie (Monsignor Kavanaugh); Gloria Edwards (Nurse).

CREW: A Gower St. Picture, a Francis Delia Film. *Production Design:* Douglas Metrov. *Music:* Joe Delia. *Director of Photography:* Frank Byers. *Film Editor:* Philip J. Sgriccia. *Casting:* Janet Cunningham. *Associate Producer:* Steve Beswick. *Based on the novel “Freeway” by:* Deanne Barkley. *Produced by:* Peter S. Davis, William Panzer. *Screenplay by:* Darrell Fetty, Francis Delia. *Directed by:* Francis Delia. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A Scripture-quoting madman, Heller (Drago) continues his “purge,” murdering innocent drivers on the Los Angeles freeways. A nurse, Sunny (Fluegel) has made catching Heller her obsession, since the psycho shot and murdered her husband on the road one night. Sunny is in an accident herself even as Heller calls into a local radio show host (Belzer) and quotes from Revelation, selecting and killing his next victim, number 14. Sunny teams with a mysterious bounty

hunter named Frank (Russo) who also wants to stop the killer for his own reasons. They learn that Heller may be a schizophrenic priest, but will this information lead them to him?

COMMENTARY: There are over six hundred miles of freeway in the Los Angeles area, but over six thousand drivers carry guns, the low-budget horror-action road movie *Freeway* informs the audience. That's a frightening statistic (if true), and this low-budget thriller is a different sort of "stalker" picture, with evil Billy Drago hunting small fish on the highways like he's a great white shark in the ocean. As Heller, *Freeway*'s lunatic, Drago uses automobiles as though they're lethal weapons. Out of the blue, he pulls up to unsuspecting drivers, blinds them with his high beams, then rams them. Finally, he'll shoot at them.

Since road rage is a fact of life in modern America, *Freeway* exploits the fear that Americans don't really know their neighbors, let alone those people commuting in the lane beside them. But Heller is not an anonymous or faceless killer. He's a fallen priest who views Los Angeles as another Sodom, and sees it as his holy mission to purge the city of sin. However, his *modus operandi* doesn't make a whole lot of sense, given that set of beliefs, since his victim pool (random drivers) don't seem any more sinful than anyone else. Why not go after sex workers, hypocrites, evil corporations or studio bosses? Why just take out innocent drivers?

Perhaps it's because Heller is interpreting the Book of Revelation and views the freeway as "The Great White Throne," and refers to himself as the "Angel of Death." But the movie doesn't provide a whole lot of specific detail about his belief system. He doesn't seem to have a well-thought-out plan, but rather is a generic religious wacko, gumming his tiny crucifix idol, rubbing it over his lips.

More interesting than Heller himself is the way that the survivors of his attack view him. After he tries to take out the Clay family, each member of that clan sees the assailant differently, based on their inherent biases. One person sees the attacker as a punk, another as an African-American, another as a hippie. This is a nice way to comment on the reality that eyewitness reports in traffic crimes are notoriously unreliable, but otherwise this touch doesn't really fit in the movie, which is about a mourning wife going after her husband's killer.

The road scenes are strong, but the film is ultimately a rather middling experience. Richard Belzer and Clint Howard enliven it with their efforts, and there's a sex scene between Fluegel and Russo, but

the film's climax—not theirs—doesn't come off very strongly. This movie needed to step on the gas a few more times.

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Jason meets Carrie. Oh, joy. Directed by a guy who normally makes squiggly rubber monster movies for Charles Band. You were expecting something better? It’s a Jason movie! Remember, our job is to hate the victims, and we do, so mission accomplished.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster, Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lar Park Lincoln (Tina); Kevin Blair (Nick); Susan Blue (Amanda Shepard); Terry Kiser (Dr. Crews); Susan Jennifer Sullivan (Melissa); Elizabeth Kaitan (Robin); Jon Renfield (David); Jeff Bennett (Eddie); Heidi Kozak (Sandra); Diana Barrows (Maddy); Larry Cox (Russell); Craig Thomas (Ben); Diane Almeida (Kate); Kane Hodder (Jason); Jennifer Banko (Young Tina); John Otrin (Mr. Shepard); Michael Schroeder (Dan); Delano Palugh (Rescue Worker).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Friday Four, Inc. Production of a John Carl Buechler Film. *Casting:* Anthony Barnao. *Music:* Harry Manfredini, Fred Mollin. *Production Designer:* Richard Lawrence. *Special Makeup Effects:* Magical Media Industries Inc. *Mechanical Effects by:* Image Engineering Inc. *Mechanical Effects Coordinator:* Lou Carlucci. *Associate Producer:* Barbara Sach. *Director of Photography:* Paul Elliott. *Film Editors:* Barry Zetlin, Maureen O’Connell Martin Jay Sadoff. *Written by:* Daryl Haney, Manuel Fidello. *Produced by:* Iain Paterson. *Stunt Coordinator:* Kane Hodder. *Directed by:* John Carl Buechler. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Young Tina (Banko) is traumatized when her parents argue. When her father (Otrin) tries to apologize for his behavior, Tina’s psychic powers come to a boil and she accidentally causes his drowning in Crystal Lake by collapsing a pier. Years later, Tina is an adult (Lincoln) living with the guilt of her actions as a child. Under the guidance of Dr. Crews (Kiser), she returns to Crystal Lake to face the pain.

She uses her psychic powers to attempt to revive her father, but they

resurrect the mass murderer Jason Voorhees (Hodder) instead. Jason murders more teens and locals, until Tina bands together with bad-boy Nick (Blair) to stop him. She uses all of her psychokinetic powers to combat the undead Voorhees, but it will be a specter from the past who finally takes down the maniac.

COMMENTARY: Here's a little-known fact about telekinesis and other psychic powers: If you're not very careful, they can miss.

In a sentence, that's the absurd premise of *Friday the 13th*'s seventh installment, *The New Blood*. Since the supernatural door was tossed open with *Jason Lives*, *The New Blood* dashes through that gap at warp speed by introducing a teen character named Tina who possesses *Carrie*-like paranormal powers. However, straining credulity, Tina *mistakenly* resurrects Jason (still at the bottom of Crystal Lake) with her zappy psychic powers, when she was actually aiming (and wishing) to revive her dead father. Don't you just hate when that happens?

When Jason emerges from his watery grave, he's quite a sight: Jason Voorhees 2.0. He has an exposed spine, his clothes are ragged and in general he looks a great deal more menacing than before. He's wider too in the shoulders, perhaps even a little bloated. But director John Carl Buechler shoots Jason from an appropriate low angle, filling up more of the frame with the boogeyman and consequently making him look more imposing than ever.

Unfortunately, *The New Blood* returns to the tired template of older entries like III and V, making the victim pool more or less unlikable. Dr. Crews is a manipulator, and Melissa is an evil bitch who wants to steal the hunky Nick away from Tina even though she doesn't like him. Again, even if it's subtle, the filmmakers choose not to have the audience empathize with these folks. When they die horribly at Jason's hands, we're supposed to think they deserve it.

However, *The New Blood* exists for one reason: to pit Jason versus Carrie, or rather Tina, in a battle that employs psychic powers. It's brute strength against mental energy, and in this case, the final battle doesn't disappoint. Tina psychically tightens the hockey mask over Jason's head so it squeezes his skull and puss spurts out in one really nice moment. Later, she tries to electrocute him, but it does no good since he's already technically dead, and electricity revived him once before.

Then, Tina levitates a can of nails and fires them at Jason like they're

bullets. Tina even manages to telekinetically lower a shaky roof onto Jason's unsuspected noggin, and by this point, the audience actually starts to feel sorry for brother Voorhees, as he's clearly outmatched and outwitted. But watching Jason get handed his hat—or hockey mask, as it were—by Carrie, er, Tina, is tremendous fun, and the special effects are pretty good. Of all the *Friday* films, this is the one that most successfully competes with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series in terms of elaborate effects. But whereas the latter Elm Street films feel like episodic efforts devoted to a particular set piece, *The New Blood* reserves its fire for that lengthy climactic battle. That was probably a sound choice.

The New Blood is neither the worst nor the best of the *Friday the 13th* films, but rather somewhere in the middle of the pack. The first hour or so is out-and-out dross, but by the time of the celebrity smackdown between slasher and psychic in the last act, the film seems pumping with new blood indeed.

My absolute favorite of all Jason's kills occurs in this film. Jason zips up an unfortunate camper in a sleeping bag, and then—like she's a sack of potatoes—slams the bag and camper into a nearby tree trunk repeatedly. When I looked for this scene on video, it appeared oddly truncated. I remembered it as being the very definition of overkill, and therefore kind of funny.

Fright Night 2



Cast and Crew

CAST: Roddy McDowall (Peter Vincent); William Ragsdale (Charlie Brewster); Traci Lin (Alex); Jonathan Gries (Louie); Russell Clark (Belle); Brian Thompson (Bozworth); Merritt Butrick (Richie); Ernie Sabella (Dr. Harrison); Julie Carmen (Regine); Matt Landers (Mel); Josh Richman (Fritzy); Karen Anders (Mrs. Stern); Rochelle Ashana (Art Major); Blair Tefkin (Bernice); Alexander Folk (Sergeant); Scanlon Gail (Watch Captain); Grant Owens (Jailer).

CREW: Vista Organization Presents a Tommy Lee Wallace Film. *Casting:* Nina Axelrod. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Film Editor:* Jay Lash Cassidy. *Production Designer:* Dean Tschetter. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Line Producer:* Jeffrey Sudzin. *Stunt Coordinator:* Edward James Ulrich. *Art Director:* Randy Moore. *Special Visual Effects:* Gene

Warren, Jr. *Written by*: Tim Metcalfe, Miguel Tejada-Flores, and Tommy Lee Wallace. *Based on Characters created by*: Tom Holland. *Produced by*: Herb Jaffe, Mort Engelberg. *Directed by*: Tommy Lee Wallace. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 108 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Charley, what if there are more of them out there?”—A set-up for *Fright Night 3*?

SYNOPSIS: Three years after he and *Fright Night* host Peter Vincent (McDowall) vanquished the vampire Jerry Dandridge, Charley Brewster (Ragsdale) has become convinced by his therapist Dr. Harrison (Sabella) that they merely had a shared delusion and faced a run-of-the-mill serial killer rather than a vampire. But when Jerry’s vampire sister, a bent-on-revenge performance artist named Regine (Carmen), moves into Peter’s apartment with her undead entourage including beast-man Louie (Gries) and bug eater Bozworth (Thompson), Charley realizes that he, Peter and his new girlfriend Alex (Lin) are in terrible trouble. Regine goes after Charley’s friend Richie (Butrick), and then steals Peter’s job, becoming the host of *Fright Night*. But worst of all, by night she is slowly turning Charley into a vampire so she may exact her revenge on him for all of eternity.

COMMENTARY: What a terrible disappointment! *Fright Night* remains one of the great horror movies of the “greed is good” decade, and more than that, a terrifically entertaining picture in general. A good sequel could have jump-started a horror franchise that might have lasted for years and vetted wonderful stories about Peter Vincent, fearless (kinda) vampire killer. Instead, the world got *Fright Night 2*, a flat, lethargic viewing experience without one iota of suspense, momentum or originality.

The problems with *Fright Night 2* may actually be genetic. They reach back to the film’s DNA, to the moment when a sequel was first conceived and some not-so-clever parent decided that what viewers *really* wanted was to see in the sequel was the exact same story played out a second time. *Fright Night 2*’s progenitors could have dramatized a new story. They could even have pitted Peter and Charley (whose name is spelled incorrectly in this film as Charlie, revealing the level of care involved in the film) against a new “featured” monster, like a werewolf, or a mummy, or zombies ... or *anything!* But no such luck, this is a film that knows what worked once and is hellbent on it working one more time. Inevitably, it all falls apart the second time around the block.

Didn’t you like the moment in the original film when Charley gazes

out of his bedroom window and spies men walking a casket into the basement of the house next door? That shot is repeated in *Fright Night 2*, but at a dorm. Enjoy how Charley's comic-relief friend in the first film, Evil Ed, got transformed into a vampire in *Fright Night*? The same thing happens to his roommate Richie (Merritt Butrick) in the sequel. Tantalized by that romantic dance between Dandridge and Amy (Amanda Bearse), vampire and victim in *Fright Night*? It's regurgitated in the sequel with Regine and Charley, generating not even a spark of interest. Appreciate how the character of Peter Vincent was a coward in Tom Holland's film and had to work up the courage to save Charley and defeat the vampires? The character goes through precisely the same story arc here, suffering a total relapse into cowardice and diffidence.

And lastly, remember how Chris Sarandon chewed over that delicious line, "Welcome ... to ... *Fright Night!*" during the original's remarkable staircase confrontation? Well—yep, you guessed it—Regine, Jerry Dandridge's sister (played as if in a coma by Julie Carmen), echoes that line here. It actually deflates the scene, so flat and uninspired is the line reading.

John Wayne once quipped, in regards to remaking *Rio Bravo* two times with director Howard Hawks, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But leaving aside the fact that the film limply hits all the hot spots from *Fright Night*, one can also look at its failing merely in terms of believability.

The crux of this story is that Charley has been convinced by his therapist that Jerry Dandridge was actually just a serial killer, and that he and Peter Vincent shared that delusion. In other words, the tenacious, tough kid of *Fright Night* who wouldn't take no for an answer from Peter Vincent, and who stuck rigorously to his guns (over the objection of peers and his girlfriend)—the one who fought tooth and nail to save Amy from her fate as a vampire bride—is now swayed by psychobabble that this experience did not occur! If audiences are willing to accept this plot device, one that completely undercuts the Charley character, then I have a cheap bridge for sale in Brooklyn.

At some point fairly early in the game, somebody must have realized that the *Fright Night 2* script was such a leaden turd that they decided to cut their losses. One can only assume that's what occurred since this sequel features nary a fraction of the original's sterling production values. The special effects are absolutely terrible ... like, Ed Wood-level terrible. In one sequence, the camera swoops in on an escaping car (from the point of view of a flying vampire) and the audience is

treated to a top view of a *miniature car model and diorama road*, the kind of thing you once built in your basement with your Dad. The car literally looks like a kid's toy, something that Godzilla would crush in a Toho film.

Later, Peter Vincent's apartment is depicted by a matte painting instead of a real brick-and-mortar building, like it would have simply been too much trouble to actually go out and scout a location (or return to the original location seen in the first film).

Amanda Bearse and Stephen Geoffreys' wisely gave this sequel a wide berth, and their droll, amusing presences are missed in the film. About the time that *Fright Night 2* gets to a werewolf who bowls with a decapitated human head and the androgynous vampire who kills on roller skates, these performers are *really* missed.

Even the climax is a failure. The film's creators obviously had a vested interest in seeing these characters return for future sequels, and so couldn't kill Charley or Peter. Which means that the end is totally lacking a sense of menace; it's strait-jacketed from a creative standpoint. Imagine, for a moment, how—in a good sequel—audiences would have been shattered and absolutely devastated by the death of Peter Vincent, a character it had grown to love over two movies. But that's a concept too daring for this movie, and as a result Peter—and the *Fright Night* franchise—is but a shadow of his former self in a sequel that's not merely unnecessary, but actually insulting.

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“By default, *Halloween IV* turns out to be the best of the sequels ... the director, Dwight H. Little, is a passable Carpenter clone. He builds suspense well, downplays the gore and comes up with enough shocks and twists to keep this thing going for 88 minutes.”—John Hartle, “Finally, A Decent *Halloween* Sequel,” *The Seattle Times*, October 22, 1988, page C4.

“Not scary, not silly and not sexy ... trash without flash ... Perhaps the saddest element, though, is watching Pleasence and recalling what a fine stage (*Man in the Glass Booth*) and film (*The Great Escape*) actor he has been in the past.”—Doug Brode, “Fourth *Halloween*: All Trash, No Flash,” *The Post-Standard*, October 26, 1988, page D4.

“Yawn.”—Bill O’Connor, “Guess What! Michael Myers Didn’t Die! No New Tricks, No Special Treats in *Halloween IV*,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 25, 1988, page C5.

“[T]he acting is solid, especially that of Donald Pleasence as the doctor ... Since Michael only kills the people in the way of his path to his niece, the slashing isn’t tediously random (as in the *Friday the 13th* film), and there’s even a chilling, unexpected ending.”—Ben Yagoda, “A Cut Above Slasher Films/*Halloween IV* Has Its Good Points,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, October 24, 1988, page 53.

“Poor old Michael needs a new, inventive set of writers.”—Joan E. Vadeboncouer, “*Halloween* Sequel Is No Treat,” *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, October 22, 1988, page A7.

“And a welcome return it is. Intelligently written, wonderfully performed, capturing much of the spirit of Carpenter’s original, with a fine adaptation of the original music by Alan Howarth, former Carpenter collaborator. We all expected the worst after *Halloween III*, and this one surprised us. In the rarest of rarities department, this is one of the few horror films where people don’t make the clichéd stupid choices that get them killed—they make smart choices, and get killed anyway. The ‘end’ of Michael Myers is a little drab, but the end of the film hit one out of the park—too bad subsequent sequels were too scared to pick up the ball from where this film left it. Until Jamie Lee Curtis would return in the *Halloween: H20*, this was the best of the *Halloween* sequels. It would be a rough ride until Jamie Lee’s return.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Donald Pleasence (Dr. Sam Loomis); Ellie Cornell (Rachel Carruthers); Danielle Harris (Jamie Lloyd); George P. Wilbur (Michael Myers); Michael Pataki (Dr. E.W. Hoffman); Beau Starr (Sheriff Meeker); Kathleen Kinmont (Kelly); Sasha Jenson (Brady); Gene Ross (Earl); Carmen Filip (Jack Sayer); Raymond O’Connor (Security Guard); Jeff Olson (Richard Carruthers); Karen Alston (Darlene Carruthers); Nancy Borgenicht (Woman Attendant); David Jensen (Attendant); Richard Stay (Wade); Danny Ray (Tommy); Michael Flynn (Deputy Pierce); George Sullivan (Deputy Logan); Walt Logan Field (Unger).

CREW: Moustapha Akkad Presents a Trancas International Films Production. *Casting:* David Cohn, Paul Bengston. *Film Editor:* Curtiss

Clayton. *Music*: Alan Howarth. “*Halloween*” *Theme*: John Carpenter. *Associate Producer*: M. Sonousi. *Director of Photography*: Peter Lyons Collister. *Executive Producer*: Moustapha Akkad. *Story by*: Dhani Lipsius, Larry Rattner, Benjamin Rattner, Alan B. McElroy. *Screenplay by*: Alan B. McElroy. *Special Effects Makeup*: John Buechler. *Directed by*: Dwight H. Little. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 88 minutes.

INCANTATION: “We aren’t talking about any prisoner, Hoffman. We are talking about *evil* on two legs.”—Dr. Loomis describes his quarry, Michael Myers, in *Halloween IV*.

P.O.V.

“The funniest part is when I got up and ran to the school, and got Michael Myers with the fire extinguisher. People always ask me what my favorite line is, and this is where I had my dumbest line. To this day it still is. I come barreling out, and there’s the cavalry. And they say ‘Where is he?’ And I say, ‘In there!’ and they say ‘Where?’ and I say ‘The school!’ It was just so painfully obvious that I didn’t have the gumption to say, ‘Hey folks, we have to change this writing a little bit.’ That one got away...”—Ellie Cornell, *Halloween IV*’s Rachel Carruthers, remembers shooting the film.

SYNOPSIS: Michael Myers (Wilbur) escapes during a prison transfer from Smith’s Grove on October 30, 1988, and immediately heads to Haddonfield, where his young niece Jamie Lloyd (Harris) lives with her foster parents and sister, Rachel (Cornell).

An obsessive (and scarred) Dr. Sam Loomis pursues Michael to Haddonfield, but by Halloween night, The Shape is up to his murderous old tricks. He cuts the power to Haddonfield, launches a pre-emptive strike against the police station and begins to methodically murder Rachel’s friends in his quest to get Jamie.

The survivors of Michael’s massacre gather in Sheriff Meeker’s (Starr) house, but Michael’s need to kill his only living relative is strong. In the course of a terrifying night, Rachel finds the inner strength to battle Michael and protect her young sister.

COMMENTARY: It’s amazing how Donald Pleasence can generate a shiver merely by quietly whispering the name “*Michael*.” He does that—and much more—in *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers*, a splendid sequel to John Carpenter’s *Halloween*. Dwight Little’s film allows Loomis to be Loomis (even though by all rights, the character should have died in that hospital fire at the end of *Halloween II*), which means that the clever screenplay offers plenty of opportunities

for the good, possibly mad doctor to wax poetic about the nature of the Shape, and of pure evil. More trenchantly, however, *Halloween IV* introduces two new beloved characters to the franchise, final girl Rachel Carruthers and her sister, Jamie Lloyd. Both are played with extraordinary humanity by their respective actresses and both immediately prove likable and, more important, real.

As the *Friday the 13th* films were moving further towards supernatural horror, even introducing a Carrie-like telekinetic character in *The New Blood* (1988), and Freddy was offing yet another bunch of interchangeable high school students in *The Dream Master* (1988), *Halloween* wisely went back to basics: the idea of a babysitter stalked by a killer on All Hallow's Eve.

Yet, there's another reason why *Halloween IV* succeeds so remarkably. While the film sticks to the basics and sheds the excess (namely goofy humor), it simultaneously—and rather impressively—throws some curve balls into its clever script. There's one menacing scene, for instance, when more than one Michael Myers appears amidst the fog to stalk Rachel and young Jamie. The scene isn't supernatural in derivation, it's simply a trick, which keeps it in the real universe of Halloween's trick-or-treating. Nonetheless, it's quite effective at generating scares, and plays on an earlier image of Michael unbound, his reflection in a mirror stretching to the horizon and beyond. Just imagine being surrounded by four Shapes, and you get a sense of how effective this scene is.



Rachel Carruthers (Ellie Cornell) hangs on for dear life while Michael Myers (George Wilbur) attacks in *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers* (1988).

Secondly, Michael now seems to consider his 1978 go at Laurie Strode a rehearsal. Here, he purposefully and determinedly wipes out Haddonfield's bureaucracy and infrastructure before it can respond to

him. He heads to the power plant and plunges the city into darkness, and launches a decapitation strike against the police force, leaving the citizenry defenseless. Too clever for Michael? Well, in this case at least he isn't locating veins on his patients, attaching tubes, and draining blood. Seriously, Michael's actions in *Halloween IV* are methodical and sensible, and they assume that he would have learned something from his initial strike, which is an interesting touch. Jason, on the other hand, doesn't seem to learn from film to film.

The absence of the police, save for Sheriff Meeker and the ill-fated Deputy Logan, gives rise to some interesting scenes in which the redneck citizenry of Haddonfield forms a mob and goes out with hunting rifles to kill Myers. In the process, an innocent kid (probably one wearing one of those Michael Myers masks) gets shot down. Again, this development appears to fit well with Michael's insurgency. He's cut the power, crippled the authority, and has the men in town shooting at each other. All the better to seek his prey, his imperiled little niece.

The twists and turns aren't the film's only source of delight. This is a movie that works hard to establish a sense of continuity with the first film in the series. Sheriff Brackett gets mentioned by name (he's retired to Florida), the audience meets a grown-up Lindsay, whom Laurie used to babysit, and, of course, Jamie's clown costume recalls Michael's costume in 1963 ... a development which impacts the film's stunning conclusion. Michael's penchant for killing (and eating) dogs is also remembered, as is his theft of a mask and supplies (he has to get those knives from somewhere). Structurally, the film mirrors the original in a few key places. A scene in the car with Lindsay and Rachel discussing boys reflects Laurie and Annie's ride to their babysitting gigs, and Jamie's teasing at the hands of cruel classmates recalls Tommy's ribbing by his buddies (and the smashing of a pumpkin). These aren't rip-off moments, only ones that remind the viewer that *Halloween* is a film franchise with a history and a sense of continuity.

Still, one must wonder how Michael can see after Laurie Strode shot his eyes out in the conclusion to *Halloween II*.

Despite all the film's strengths, one senses that Dwight Little isn't quite the visual stylist or classicist that Carpenter is. The film's framing and compositions tend to be clunky and uninventive at times, and some odd visual non-sequiturs emerge from time to time. For instance, late in the film, Myers appears wearing a different mask, one that features a white, curly wig instead of the normal one. Also,

during the climactic truck attack, it takes one of the redneck stewards an awful long time to detect that his mates—standing literally inches from him in the truck bed—are being offed by Myers.

Yet, Little gets the chases down pat, and when I saw the film its opening weekend, the audience collectively jumped out of its seats at the moment when Jamie, alone in the night, turns around and bumps into Loomis. Still, one senses that Little was more comfortable with the character aspects of this film because new players *and* old ones register so strongly.

Ellie Cornell is particularly strong as Rachel, a delightful girl-next-door with just the right measures of sassiness and sweetness. Early scenes reveal her worrying about her weight, complaining about responsibilities and the like, but balance those with ones in which she shows sensitivity and kindness to Jamie. She's good-looking, charming, and every bit Laurie's equal in terms of her resourcefulness and resilience. Cornell created such a memorable individual that by the time of the final chase, audiences have fallen for her totally, and when she falls from the roof, viewers are pissed. They don't want her to die.

And that is when you know a slasher film is working: when the character is so strong, identifiable and likable that losing them actually hurts.

The strength in Cornell's performance may be best exhibited in that rooftop scene. Jamie and Rachel have just fled the attic, Michael in hot pursuit. Rachel realizes quickly that the roof is a dead end, and that she and Jamie need to get down. She ties a rope to the chimney and prepares to lower her stepsister down. Watch Cornell in this sequence. She focuses all of her energy giving instructions to Harris on how to get down, tightening the rope, tending to her sister. She knows, in this moment, that Michael is so close-by that likely only one of them will make it. In her eyes and voice, you can see her commit totally and utterly to that fact; that getting Jamie down may be her last act of her life. Her voice is tight, authoritative, her actions a little shaky, but there's a strength and determination there that is convincing, real and also quite fetching. She's a dynamo of a final girl. If I'm ever trapped on a roof with Michael Myers, I hope it's with Rachel.



Just how many “Shapes” are there? Michael Myers multiplies in *Halloween IV*.

Danielle Harris is also terrific (and even better in the inferior *Halloween V*). She’s a youngster here, but unlike many kiddie performances, she doesn’t hit a false note throughout, and seemingly with little effort transmits all the fear and horror that a young girl in this situation surely would. She’s a tough cookie, like Rachel. Harris and Cornell share a powerful chemistry that indeed feels akin to sisterhood.

Finally, *Halloween IV*’s shock ending takes the *Halloween* saga full circle. According to Loomis, “Michael Myers is in Hell, buried, where he belongs.” However, his peculiar brand of evil passes on to Jamie. In a point-of-view, heavy-breathing scene that skillfully apes *Halloween*’s famous opening scenes (down to the clown mask and costume), this re-birth is effectively captured. The film ends in pure pandemonium, with Loomis shouting “No!” going over the edge of sanity, and pointing his gun at little Jamie. She stands perched atop the stairs, weapon in hand, wearing the clown costume, depicted in a low-angle shot indicating power, and the movie ends with a bang.

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers is a slasher sequel that

knows how to get the job done. Not just because it brings back Myers, but because it takes the time to develop its characters; because it makes successful efforts to play on audience expectations (tricking us with multiple Myers, etc.); and finally, because it has the courage to go for broke with that finale.

The next installment, *The Revenge of Michael Myers*, took all the assets and triumphs so ably and skillfully provided by this film (a new hero in Rachel; the beginning of a new story arc; a re-infusion of energy) and flushed it down the toilet. But no matter, for the present. Forget about the Shape of things to come and enjoy *Part IV of Halloween* for what it is: a rip-roaring good movie.

CLOSE-UP: Final Girl: “My agent had sent me from New York to Los Angeles for pilot season, and it was January, I believe,” Ellie Cornell begins, recounting the beginning of her involvement in the *Halloween* saga. “And in those thirty days I had about twenty auditions, because I was a ‘young ingénue.’ That’s how it started.

“They sent me on a regular old audition for *Halloween IV*, and it wasn’t that long of a process. I remember specifically screen-testing on a Friday, and hearing that I’d gotten the role on a Monday. So I had to go through the weekend waiting and wondering. Dwight Little was there, and the writer was there, and I remember they said they liked my voice. Which I thought was really interesting. So I screen tested, and it was the biggest thrill to get that part. And I was really struck, in retrospect, because at the original audition Rebecca Shaeffer was there. She was killed shortly thereafter.”

Did Cornell know what she was getting into, stepping into the shoes of Jamie Lee Curtis? “I had seen the first *Halloween*. I think I had seen the third one, kind of by accident at my grandmother’s house, and I was struck by how it was off the plot line. So I was thrilled when I read the script for *Halloween IV* that it seemed to be getting back to its roots. Which I felt was so important.

“When I got *Halloween IV*, very shortly thereafter, the auditions for one of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* came out, and they were looking for an Ellie Cornell prototype,” the actress notes with a laugh. “I just fit the bill as the girl next door. But I liked Rachel Carruthers a whole lot, and I was thrilled to be offered that part, because she reminded me of Jamie Lee Curtis and that she was not the popular pretty one, but she had the smarts and the wits to keep away from Michael Myers. That was a huge thrill. I think I was twenty-four at the time playing seventeen. It was funny at the time getting letters from teenage boys,

and I was practically married. That's movie magic."

Cornell remembers a happy shoot. "There were lots of giggles. You have a big sense of humor when you're working that hard. Danielle Harris and I worked around thirty-eight days of a forty-day shoot. It was really intense, with a bunch of night shoots. We were just plunked down in Salt Lake City, away from our homes."

And did she and the younger final girl get along? "We got on really, really well. We were together 24-7, we all lived at the same hotel, and Jamie's mom was very involved, because Jamie was very young. We also had the great honor of working with Donald Pleasence and Beau Starr and Kathleen Kinmont and Sasha Jenson. It was a fun cast."

Was Cornell scared at all, of working with the infamous (and imposing) Michael Myers? "Well, the first time I worked with Myers, it wasn't scary in any way," the actress notes.

However, something scary did occur while filming the rooftop chase sequence. "I did slide on a nail in the rooftop scene," Cornell reveals with a bit of embarrassment. "It was so funny, because they'd gone to great time and expense to build this fake rooftop outside of Salt Lake City that was obviously much lower to the ground than the roof of the real building. But it was still up there. It was not any easier to get to. It was not like you could just step up and you're on the roof. You had to climb a ladder to get up there."

"At one point, climbing down the roof, I was cut, and the medic went bonkers. That's just their job, to protect the talent. Nothing was hanging out that shouldn't have been. It was a surface scratch. I don't even think I got stitches. Everyone goes on alert when someone gets hurt. It makes a great story if it's really gory, but truth be known, it wasn't really that bad."

"Physically, that scene was so grueling, and you get on adrenaline rushes. You're cold, you're out there in the middle of the night, and it was so fun. It was just a blast."

Cornell also had the pleasure of driving a pick-up truck that smashes into Michael Myers in the film's finale. "I did all of my own driving," the actress reveals. "The only stunt woman I had was actually [for the scene] falling off the roof. They wouldn't let me do that."

"In that truck scene, I had nothing to react to except air when Michael Myers reaches in and rips that guy's head off. That was all added later. The whole reaction scene was done with my imagination."

“The part where we’re in the truck and all this stuff was happening, it was actually all these technicians—production assistants—outside with enormous planks of wood that had been placed under the truck, and they were jumping on them, so it looked like we were bouncing along. That’s the fun of making these movies that don’t have enormous budgets. I was floored when I saw *Halloween IV* for the first time with all the music and effects, because when you’re shooting, you wonder, ‘What is this going to be like?’ And I was floored by how well it played. It was so believable.

“I went to Westwood with my agent and there was a line around the block, and I said, ‘What are you guys waiting for?’ and they said ‘*Halloween IV*.’ Talk about shaking in your shoes!”

Hellbound: Hellraiser 2

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“[Director Tony Randel] lifts scenes from the first film to introduce the story, which picks up where the first ended. It provides a glaring comparison between the creative genius of Barker and Randel’s run-of-the-mill talents.”—Jeff Strickler, “*Hellbound: Hellraiser 2* has gone to...,” *The Star Tribune*, December 23, 1988, page 02E.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Clare Higgins (Julia); Ashley Laurence (Kirsty); Kenneth Cranham (Dr. Channard); Imogen Boorman (Tiffany); William Hope (Kyle McRae); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Sean Chapman (Frank); Barbie Wilde (Female Cenobite); Simon Bamford (Butterball); Nicholas Vince (Chatterer); Oliver Smith (Browning); Angus McInnes (Ronson); Deborah Joel (Skinless Julia); James Tillitt (Officer Cortez); Edwin Craig (Wheelchair Patient); Ron Travis (Workman #1); Oliver Parker (Workman #2); Catherine Chevalier (Tiffany’s Mother).

CREW: New World Pictures in association with Cinemarque Entertainment Ltd. Present a Film Futures production. *Casting:* Doreen Jones. *Special Makeup Effects:* Imagine Animation. *Special Effects Makeup Design:* Geoff Portas. *Special Makeup Effects Consultant:* Bob Keen. *Production Design:* Mike Buchanan. *Director of Photography:* Robin Vidgeon. *Film Editor:* Richard Marden. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Executive Producers:* Christopher Webster, Clive Barker. *Associate Producer:* David Barron. *Screenplay by:* Peter Atkins. *Based on*

a story by: Clive Barker. *Produced by:* Christopher Figg. *Directed by:* Tony Randel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Trick us again, child, and your suffering will be legendary, even in Hell.”—Cenobite Master and horror icon Pinhead (Doug Bradley) warns Kirsty not to double-cross him a second time in the bloody sequel to 1987’s *Hellraiser*, *Hellbound*.

SYNOPSIS: After her ordeal with the Cenobites, otherworldly angels of pleasure and pain, Kirsty (Laurence) awakens from the trauma to find herself in the Channard Psychiatric Clinic for observation. Though the police, including Det. Ronson (McInnes), don’t buy her wild story of contact with a hellish dimension, the sadistic Dr. Channard (Cranham) is a true believer, and takes steps to revive Kirsty’s evil stepmother, Julia (Higgins).

Kirsty receives a message from Hell requesting help, which she believes originates with her dead father. Dr. Channard’s assistant Kyle (Hope) brings Kirsty to Channard’s estate, where they learn that Channard knows everything about the Cenobites, their history, and the Lament Configuration puzzle box that summons them.

After slaying several prostitutes to grow back her skin, the resurrected Julia kills Kyle. Channard exploits Tiffany (Boorman), a mute clinic patient with a talent for puzzle solving, to complete the Lament Configuration. Tiffany is successful and opens the door to Hell, summoning the fearsome Pinhead (Bradley) and his Cenobite assistants.

Kirsty explores Hell looking for her Dad, but only finds her perverse uncle Frank (Chapman). Meanwhile, Channard, a pioneer in sadism and suffering, is converted by Leviathan, Lord of the Labyrinth, into a new Cenobite, one who challenges Pinhead and his posse for supremacy. Kirsty and Tiffany search for a way out of Hell, and must rely on the duplicitous Julia for help.

COMMENTARY: “Is death the fourth dimension?” blares the headline topping one of Channard’s archival documents in the skillful sequel, *Hellbound: Hellraiser 2*, an odyssey that leads the avid horror fan straight to the depths of Hades. In *Hellbound*, this legendary dimension of pain and suffering is memorably rendered as a vast labyrinth (and matte painting), surrounded by little realms where individuals suffer in their personal, perpetual torments. Although it’s a fascinating journey, too much of the movie’s visit to Hell is spent in narrative limbo, as main characters get lost in nearly identical corridors and run

back and forth trying to locate one another. Perhaps that's *really* what Hell is: losing your way in a metropolis and having no one to ask for directions.

In Greek mythology, Orpheus willingly descended to the Underworld to find and retrieve his love, Eurydice. In *Hellbound*, heroine Kirsty, again played by Ashley Laurence, undertakes a similar quest: the rescue of her dead father. Little does she realize that she's merely being "teased" by Uncle Frank, not her Dad. Why Kirsty would assume that her Dad, basically an innocent, ends up in Hell, is a question the movie never addresses. But anyway, the invitation to Hell from Uncle Frank results in the film's finest set piece, as Kirsty enters Tartarus's recreation of the *Hellraiser* home. There, Frank dwells in torment, surrounded by dozens of altar-like slabs, with writhing and moaning women—draped beneath curtains—just inches from him. Yet, when he lifts the coverings, the women disappear, and he never gets to have sex with them. If you remember Frank from the previous film, you know this is quite a personal torment. "They always promise, but never deliver," he bemoans. Turns out he sent for Kristy because he suspects she's a girl who can deliver.

Hellbound also catches up with Julia, another terrific character from the original film. A bloody mattress (a *really* bloody mattress) resurrects this femme fatale, and Higgins plays her evil stepmother role to the hilt. She feeds on unlucky men (like Kyle) and prostitutes, until she restores herself to beautiful, sexy form. She apparently returns from the grave at the bidding of Leviathan, Lord of the Labyrinth, because she shows no fear (unlike Frank in the earlier film) when the Cenobites come for Channard. On the contrary, it seems as though she planned the whole thing. Still, one has to wonder why it took Julia's return to corporeality in our world for her to find Frank in the underworld and rip out his heart.

That's just one question that *Hellbound* skirts. For instance, in this film, the evil buck-toothed Engineer (with scorpion-like tail) that chased Kirsty through the Labyrinth in the first movie is missing in action, perhaps because it looked so lame. Also, when called by Tiffany's solving of the riddle box, Pinhead stops his Cenobite brethren from ripping her asunder with the pronouncement, "Wait! It is not hands that call us ... it is desire!" Really? Kirsty opened the box by mistake—accidentally—in *Hellraiser*, and Pinhead had no qualms about going after her, forcing her to make a devil's bargain to bring them Frank. Also, when the Lament Configuration is opened in this film, apparently everybody in proximity can make the visit to Hell. The Cenobites pass Tiffany while Channard and Julia look on from

another room, and take another door to explore the maze-like Underworld. In the first film, there was one opening (in the hospital) for Kirsty, and she had to race through it to return to reality. Furthermore, the other doctors and patients in the facility didn't get sucked into her nightmare.

Hellbound is a very different film from its predecessor, and in one sense that's good. A sequel should explore new territory. Still, the more intimate nature of *Hellraiser* is missed here. That was a film that concerned obsessive love, lust and perversion. A frigid Julia's need to have sex with Frank—the only man who could get her off—led her down the road of ruin. The more distinctly rubber-reality sequel is bigger in every sense, with its sojourn to the Stygian realm, but a sense of intimacy and character is sacrificed to play in this larger arena.



A game of hearts: Julia (Clare Higgins) finally gets her revenge on Frank in *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (1988).

That said, in this new territory, *Hellbound* pleases. It's a very wet movie (read: bloody), and the early scenes wherein Julia returns without her skin are quite amazing, thanks to the special effects department's contribution of an uncomfortably accurate, glistening

body suit. Pinhead is also given some wonderful pronouncements in this film: “Oh, Kirsty, so eager to play. So reluctant to admit it.” Or “We have eternity to taste your flesh.” These are wonderful icebreakers at parties, by the way.

Hellbound features a scene that depicts the Cenobite production booth, a sort of latter-day strange change machine. The film depicts Channard going through the process, his blood extracted, wires cutting into his face as he is made one of the flock. Unlike Pinhead and his female sidekick, however, Channard emerges as a kind of joke, rather than as an alluring monster. He’s carried around by a giant worm (which attaches to his head), and isn’t beautiful in the slightest. The film also provides him with a number of Freddy-esque one-liners such as “The doctor is in” and “I recommend amputation.”

These are amusing enough *bon mots*, but then—on Channard’s ascent—the film makes the unpardonable sin of killing off Pinhead in a less-than-thrilling confrontation. Kirsty has made Pinhead recall his humanity (as a soldier in World War I, a scene depicted in the film’s prologue), and Pinhead rallies his posse to stop Channard. It’s not even a fair fight, however, and Channard kills Pinhead and his gang with ridiculous ease. This should have been the film’s high point, a hellish smackdown, but it’s a giant disappointment.

Sequels were always bigger (but not necessarily better) in the late 1980s, and *Hellbound* adheres to that tradition with a slavish devotion. After a splendid and moody first half, then a classic re-introduction of the iconic Cenobites at the forty-five-minute point, the film descends into a run-around through Hell. Characters plunge down corridors, chase each other and repeatedly call out for one another while strange events occur. It’s the “Carol Anne!” principle from *Poltergeist*, only with the names “Kirsty” and “Tiffany.” Each time a character is called for, the funnier and less effective the cry becomes. And Leviathan, Lord of the Labyrinth—“God of Flesh, hunger and Desire”—turns to be a big wimp who can be controlled remotely by a Lament Configuration.

Unlike Frank’s beauties in his personal Hell, *Hellbound: Hellraiser 2* always promises and occasionally delivers, especially when Julia, Frank and Kirsty are front and center in the action. Still, one longs for the more personal nature of the original, which dealt with humanity and its foibles rather than the vastness of Hell itself.

LEGACY: *Hellbound* was a successful and popular sequel to *Hellraiser*, and the Clive Barker-inspired series continued to prove a potent force

at the box office for some time. Pinhead returned to active duty in *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth* (1992). *Hellraiser: Bloodline* (1996) represented the series' last theatrical installment in a story that saw the Lament Configuration's legacy of evil stretch to the distant future ... and outer space. Since 2000, *Hellraiser* films have premiered on the DVD market with such titles as *Hellraiser: Inferno* (2000), *Hellraiser: Hellseeker* (2002) and *Hellraiser: Hellworld* (2005).

Hide and Go Shriek

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: George Thomas (David Hanson); Donna Baltron (Judy Ramireze); Brittain Frye (Randy Flint); Annette Sinclair (Kim Downs); Scott Fults (Shawn Phillips); Ria Pavia (Malissa Morgan); Sean Kaban (John Robbins); Bunky Jones (Bonnie Williams); Jeff Levine (Fred); Scott Kubay (Zack); Michael Kelly (Wino); Ronald Colby (Phil Robbins); Donald Mark Spencer (Vince); James Serrano, Larry Lyons (Cops in Car); Robin Turk (Hooker).

CREW: *Presented by:* Dimitri Villard and Robby Wald. *Music composed and performed by:* John Ross. *Film Editors:* Mark Manos, Adam Wolfe. *Production Designer:* Sharon Viljoen. *Executive Producer:* Robby Wald. *Screenplay:* Michael Kelly. *Produced by:* Dimitri Villard. *Special Effects:* Screaming Mad George. *Directed by:* Skip Schoolnik. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four hot-to-trot teenage couples celebrate their high school graduation by spending the night partying in an urban furniture store owned by John's (Kaban) father, unaware that a dock worker—an ex-con—is living in the basement. As night falls, the graduates play hide and go seek, spread out over the three floors of the vast establishment for hanky-panky, and occasionally scare each other with mannequins, furniture and the elevator. The party-goers are soon being hunted and murdered by a cross-dressing psycho-killer. Melissa (Pavia) and Shawn (Fults), the male virgin of the group, die first. Then John, disturbed by damage to the store, confronts the killer and is impaled on a mannequin's arm. The killer kidnaps Kim (Sinclair) and ties her to the roof of an elevator. Judy (Baltron) takes charge and realizes it's time to fight back.

COMMENTARY: *Hide and Go Shriek* represents the near-final, fatigued

gasp for the slasher film paradigm of the 1980s. The film's organizing principle is, as the title suggests, the game of hide & seek, here played in a locked-up furniture shop with a bunch of teens (and the obligatory killer) by blackest night. But if the organizing principle is a "deadly game," the true obsession of the film appears to be teenage sex.

Every young protagonist seems obsessed with sex in one fashion or another. "You are going to *love* making love. You'll want to do it all the time," suggests one teen.

"I should have done it years ago and gotten it over with," ponders a young virgin.

"You were done in about ten seconds," one girl complains to her boyfriend, post-coitus. And on and on.

Indeed, the majority of the movie consists of shots of teens spooning and writhing in bed, smacking their lips in anticipation of intercourse ... which, of course, can't be depicted in an R-rated film. So the film seems like a bit of a cheat. Lots of dirty talk; not much follow-through. But—interestingly—the killer uses the sexual appetites of the victims to lure them to their deaths. For instance, the killer moons John, and then impales him with a mannequin arm. He also dons lingerie in one sequence as a trick. That's really scary!

In some twisted, ham-handed fashion, the ultimate "reveal" about the killer's identity is intended as artistic counter-balance to the horny, truly unlikable, spoiled teens. How so? Consider that this psychotic killer is a cross-dresser who has followed his cellmate out of prison and is killing everybody who threatens his former lover. But unlike the teens who seem obsessed with "doing it," the killer has formed an *emotional* attachment to his once-partner—one that goes far beyond physicality and sexuality. Yet, this element feels distinctly underplayed.

In keeping with the tenets of the form, the killer's cellmate serves as the film's red herring, an ex-con from the wrong side of the tracks who wields a knife and sleeps in the store's basement while he gets on his feet financially. At the film's conclusion, he isn't able to muster much honesty or affection for his former prison bitch. "He was my friend in prison," underplays the ex-con, vastly undercutting the significance of a relationship that has caused a man to commit murder.

Then he adds. “I tried to be straight ... I’m sorry.” The movie glosses over this critical line of dialogue so quickly, one has to wonder precisely what it means. Does he mean he tried to obey the law? Or does he mean, he tried to quash his homosexual urges?

Today, filmmakers wouldn’t hesitate to make a homosexual relationship the center of a film’s screenplay (witness the success of *Brokeback Mountain* [2005]) but *Hide and Go Shriek* doesn’t deal with this relationship or theme in anything approaching a cogent or convincing fashion. Instead of delving into the relationship in some depth, a cross-dresser simply functions as a “pervert,” a sicko driven to kill by his “unhealthy” love of another man. Interestingly, the killer speaks in a female voice throughout the film, suggesting his sexual confusion (and his role as the femme in the relationship). Hell hath no fury like a woman—or female impersonator—scorned.

Paradigm-wise, the off-the-shelf characters include Randy, the practical joker; the convict (the red herring); and the final girl, Judy. In keeping with her by-now clichéd role, Judy is virginal, and much more aware than her cohorts of the sinister events going on about her. “I think we better be ready to fight,” she suggests, rallying the surviving teen troops. Later, she’s a source of strength for the others. “We’ve got to keep it together, guys,” she declares helpfully, staying on message.

There’s also a “tour of the dead” in the furniture store basement, a grisly decapitation (*the coup de grâce*), and even the requisite sting in the tale/tail, here involving the killer and a paramedic in an ambulance. Yet the law of diminishing returns has clearly set in by this time in slasher film history, and none of these elements seem particularly inspired or originally broached.

However, the ultimate test of a horror film is always the scare quotient. If a movie is frightening, much—even confused sexual politics—can be forgiven. And to its credit, *Hide and Go Shriek* does feature a few moments guaranteed to make the hair on the back of your neck stand on end. It is unsettling how the killer often hides in plain sight, “hidden” among the mannequins. Slasher killers often leave “calling cards” at the scenes of crimes (often a specially arranged victim), and it’s more than a bit disturbing here the manner in which the killer re-arranges mannequins into creepy floor displays. And the moment when the teens decide to seek help, but realize they are trapped in the store because of padlocks and shatter-proof glass, brings up the potent fear of being caged in plain sight.

Indeed, as the teenagers bang on the windows looking out of the store, onto the avenue beyond, one can't help but reflect on how the killer has actually put them on display.

Howling IV: The Original Nightmare

★ $\frac{1}{2}$

Cast and Crew

CAST: Romy Windsor (Marie Adams); Michael T. Weiss (Richard); Antony Hamilton (Tom); Susanne Severeid (Janice); Lamya Derval (Eleanor); Norman Anstey (Sheriff); Kate Edwards (Mrs. Ormstead); Dennis Folbigge (Dr. Coombes); Anthony James (Father Camefron); Dale Cutts (Dr. Heinemann); Clive Turner (Tow Truck Driver); Megan Kruskal (Sister Ruth); Dennis Smith (Mr. Ormstead); Greg Latter (John); Maxine John (Paula).

CREW: Allied International Presents a John Hough Film. *Casting:* Don Pemrick, Gianna Pisanello. *Director of Photography:* Godfrey Godar. *Camera Operator:* Trevor Coop. *Film Editor:* Claudia Finkle, Malcolm Burns-Errington. *Music:* David George. “*Something Evil, Something Dangerous*” *vocals and lyrics by:* Justin Hayward, *music by:* Barrie Guard. *Additional Music:* Barrie Guard. *Based on the novels* The Howling I, II, and III *by:* Gary Brandner. *Story by:* Clive Turner. *Screenplay:* Clive Turner, Freddie Rowe. *Special Makeup effects produced by:* Steve Johnson’s Special Effects Inc. *Werewolves designed and created by:* Lennie Macdonald, Bruce Zahnave. *Executive Producers:* Edward Simons, Avi Lerner, Steven Lane, Robert Pringle. *Co-Producer:* Clive Turner. *Produced by:* Harry Alan Towers. *Directed by:* John Hough. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: “What was that noise? That ... *howling?*”—Stating the obvious in *Howling IV: The Original Nightmare*.

SYNOPSIS: When best-selling author Marie Adams (Windsor) collapses from exhaustion after experiencing hallucinations, her husband Richard (Weiss) takes her to a rented cottage in a small town called Drakha. By night, Marie hears howling—though Richard dismisses the noise. By day, Marie’s white poodle, Pierre, disappears. While Richard returns to L.A. for a day trip, Marie befriends a former nun, Janice (Severeid), who is looking to unravel the mysterious death of a fellow nun, Sister Ruth (Kruskal).

According to the authorities, Ruth visited Drakha, went nuts and died

after babbling about the howling. Ruth is the very nun Marie hallucinated seeing in one of her visions and since she has heard the howling herself, she researches the mystery with Janice. With the help of Marie's hunky book agent, Tony (Hamilton), Marie and Janice learn that the town is populated by werewolves. This knowledge comes too late to save Richard, who is seduced by foxy shopkeeper Eleanor (Derval). She is a werewolf, bites him on the shoulder in the woods and turns him into one of the pack. Janice and Marie come to realize that the only way to stop the plague of werewolves is to summon them to the notorious Bell Tower of Drakha and then burn it down.

COMMENTARY: By the time of *The Howling IV: The Original Nightmare* in 1988, the *Howling* series had long lapsed into embarrassment. After 1981's sterling, satirical entry, directed with flair and humor by the great Joe Dante, the werewolf series plummeted to *Manos*-like depths with a sequel starring Reb Brown, *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf*, quite possibly one of the worst films ever made. The third *Howling* film, *The Marsupials* was a step-up in quality but in the final analysis, not much more than an interesting failure.

The fourth entry, titled *The Original Nightmare* in an attempt to lure back bitter fans thoroughly turned off by the previous sequels, is not as good as *The Marsupials*, but a little stronger than the second film. Which means it's still pretty bad.

The Original Nightmare is the first of the *Howling* series designed to go directly to home video, not theater screens, and it shows in everything from the lack of quality production values and actors to the lousy makeup special effects and worst of all the TV style, square framing. In terms of it being an *original* nightmare, well, that all depends on the definition of original. The film does recycle several elements from the first film, including a marital relationship marred by infidelity, wherein a cheating husband engages in sex with a local hottie who also happens to be a werewolf.

Also, both *The Howling* and *The Original Nightmare* posit the existence of a werewolf community hiding in plain sight. The story worked so effectively in *The Howling* because it was the first time audiences had seen the werewolf story told in this particular fashion, and because the special effects transformations were revolutionary. *The Original Nightmare* tends to be dull in terms of story, since audiences familiar with the franchise will be expecting werewolves from the get-go, and the film takes a long time to get to them. And in a word, the special effects are ... rubbery.

Howling IV's plot revolves around Marie Adams, played by Romy Windsor, a writer who suffers from hallucinations about a nun and an evil town. Why she experiences these hallucinations the movie never reveals. And her explanation for visiting the resort town is a hoot too: "She needs to go somewhere where her imagination won't be stimulated," one character reports. There's virtually no danger of stimulation in this movie.

At the beginning of one scene, Marie stands in the middle of the street and says, out of the blue. "It's really strange." Since Marie is a writer, one might think she'd understand the importance of antecedents when making a pronouncement like that.

Perhaps the funniest moment derives from the badly mismanaged staging of the sex scene between adulterous husband, Michael T. Weiss and his werewolf girlfriend, Eleanor, played by smokin' Lamya Derval. She climbs on top of him and begins going to town. Only problem is, she's not positioned right. It appears she's deriving an abundance of sensual pleasure from riding his belly button.

Howling IV was followed, inevitably, by *The Howling V*.

Jack's Back

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Spader (John Wesford/Richard Wesford); Cynthia Gibb (Chris); Robert Picardo (Carlos); Rod Loomis (Sidney); Rex Ryon (Jack); Chris Mulkey (Scott); Wendell Wright (Captain Prentis); John Wesley (Sam Hilliard); Bobby Hosea (Tom Dellerton); Danitza Kingsley (Denise); Anne Betancourt (Mary); John Sutherland (Chooch); Diane Erikson (Andrea).

CREW: Elliott Kastner/Andre Blay in associate with Palisades Entertainment present a Cassian Elwes Production, a Rowdy Herrington film. *Casting:* Kimba Hills. *Music:* Danny Di Paola. *Film Editor:* Harry B. Miller. *Director of Photography:* Shelly Johnson. *Producers:* Tim Moore, Cassian Elwes. *Written and Directed by:* Rowdy Herrington. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Los Angeles, a serial killer is copying the *modus operandi* of Jack the Ripper, murdering prostitutes exactly a century after the infamous crimes were committed. Meanwhile, kindly and

philanthropic resident John Wesford (Spader) works at the free clinic and tries to help a prostitute who is pregnant. After she turns out to be the next victim, John thinks he knows who the killer is: co-worker Jack (Ryon). Desperate not to be tagged as the killer, Jack frames John and hangs him in the free clinic.

The police believe the reign of terror is over, but John's identical twin Richard (Spader) has seen the murder of his brother in his dreams, and sets about finding the man who killed him. Inevitably, this also involves him in the Ripper murders, and he begins to wonder about the suspects.

Is Jack—his brother's murderer—the psychopath, or is it a suspicious psychologist (Picardo)? Or John's hard-ass boss at the clinic, Sidney (Loomis)? In finding out, the lives of Richard and his prospective girlfriend Chris (Gibb) are endangered.

COMMENTARY: A copycat Jack the Ripper (the so-called “Father of the Modern Sex Crime”) terrorizes Los Angeles in the compelling psycho-thriller *Jack’s Back*, written and directed with a substantial degree of flair by Rowdy Harrington. This suspense movie leaps confidently from twist to twist, starting with a variation on the Janet Leigh *Psycho* trick, and then hinging much of its unpredictable nature on enigmatic star James Spader ... an accomplished actor who could truly take a character in any direction; proving either a hero or a psychotic killer.

Regarding the Janet Leigh trick (killing a star early in the picture to foster surprise and uncertainty in the audience), *Jack’s Back* revives it with a twist. Spader plays both the heroic do-gooder John, a doctor who works at a free clinic and tends to camps of the homeless, and his good-for-nothing brother, Richard. When John gets killed early on, the audience is quite surprised, and when Richard shows up, doubly so. Spader does at least as good a job playing identical twins as Jeremy Irons in Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers*, but then Spader doesn’t have to play scenes against himself. One twin doesn’t arrive on the scene till the other one’s already gone.

However, *Jack’s Back* cleverly plays with the idea that either John or Richard could be the killer. The man who kills John is ruled out, and that makes one wonder if there isn’t something dastardly about one of these twins. Of course, both prove innocent by story’s end, but it’s a credit to the script that the audience is uncertain. Spader also gets a great story arc to play. Richard is well-aware that his brother, John, was the extraordinary one. That it was John, not he, who was a boon

to mankind. If anyone should have died, it should have been Richard. However, in solving John's death, Richard finally does something worthy of John.

Jack's Back also relies on a multitude of red herrings, including one played by the inimitable Robert Picardo, who is universally depicting smoking in the film, and always looks suspicious anyway. All the script makes clear about the Jack the Ripper killer is that he's following the original's pattern, he's left-handed and he has some skills as a doctor. This paucity of clues makes for an abundance of possibilities, and *Jack's Back* thrives on playing games with the red herrings.

The second half of *Jack's Back* could probably use a bit more punch. It feels like forever from the time Richard starts investigating to the time of the final confrontation, but overall this thriller is an infinitely preferable choice to all the recent vintage "thrillers" starring Ashley Judd and Morgan Freeman like *High Crimes* (2002), which relies entirely on a canned narrative, cardboard characters and one totally ridiculous twist. *Jack's Back*, at least, boasts a sense of reality.

Killer Klowns from Outer Space

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"I know this is meant to be campy and silly and funny and deliberately goofy, but it sets my teeth on edge anyway. Sure, there is something inherently scary about clowns, but nothing except the film's design—the big-top spaceship, the red noses and the oversized shoes of the aliens—is inherently clownish. You could pretty much reshoot the film and dress weird aliens in baseball uniforms and have them fly around the universe in Wrigley Field without changing anything essential about the story. That ends up sucking the inherent scariness right out of the clowns."—MaryAnn Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic.

"Clowns are kind of scary anyway, but this film works best as a send-up of 1950s–1960s horror and science fiction films. The clown masks are inspired and creepy, and while it's all kind of dopey, this is the kind of horror film for a rainy fall afternoon with friends over. It's a lot of fun, with zippy music and its heart in the right place."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Grant Cramer (Mike Tobacco); Suzanne Snyder (Debbie); John Allen Nelson (Dave Hansen); Royal Dano (Farmer Gene); Peter Licassi (Paul Terenzi); Michael Siegel (Rich Terenzi); John Vernon (Officer Mooney); Chris Titus (Bob McReed); Irene Michaels (Stacy); Brian Degan Scott (Punk #1); Danny Kovacs (Punk #2); Karen Raff (Mom #1); Kathleen Stefano (Mom #2); Claire Bartle (Little Girl); Sharon O'Mahoney (Waitress); Steve Rockhold, Michael Harrington Burris, Geno Ponza, Scott Beatty, Paul Haley, Dennis C. Walsh, Genie Houdini, Charles Chiodo, Harrod Blank, Karl Schaeffer, Paul Parsons, Jimmy Locust, Greg Sykes (Klowns).

CREW: A Sarlui/Diamanti Presentation of a Chiodo Brothers Production. *Music:* John Massari. *Casting:* Ed Mitchell, Alana H. Lambros. *Associate Producer:* J.J. Lichauco. *Special Visual Effects:* Fantasy II Film Effects. *Film Editor:* Chris Roth. *Art Director:* Philip Dean Foreman. *Production Designer:* Charles Chiodo. *Director of Photography:* Alfred Taylor. *Executive Producers:* Paul Mason, Helen Sarlui-Tucker. *Written by:* Charles and Stephen Chiodo. *Produced by:* Edward, Stephen and Charles Chiodo. *Directed by:* Stephen Chiodo. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

INCANTATION: “There’s got to be a logical explanation for this.”—A vain hope is given voice in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*.

SYNOPSIS: Lovers Debbie (Snyder) and Mike (Cramer) see a “meteor” crash in the woods one night and discover that a spaceship resembling a circus tent has landed nearby. They explore the massive craft only to find it populated by murderous alien clowns, who are cocooning residents of the town—including a farmer and his dog—in cotton candy receptacles for later consumption. Debbie and Mike try to warn Debbie’s ex-boyfriend on the police force, Dave Hansen (Nelson), about the threat, even as the clowns march on the town. As a night of terror ensues, Dave learns that the key to destroying the clowns is to shoot them in their red, bulbous noses.

COMMENTARY: There are those horror movies that are designed just to be silly and grotesque, and *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* is one such bird. There’s no inherent deeper meaning to any of this nonsense, although it is illuminating to note that so many 1980s horror films, including *Critters* (1985), *The Hidden* (1987), *Predator* (1987) and *They Live* (1988) featured the same postulate: that Earth is some sort of primitive, backwater planet to use and exploit as aliens see fit. Perhaps a reflection of how the Reagan administration in the 1980s

viewed the Third World and its resources?

Otherwise, *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* represents a textbook example of how one relatively simple organizing principle can result in a movie with a gaggle of gags and special effects. Here, of course, a circus is the generous well-spring from which all the movie's tricks and treats bubble. Cotton candy suspended animation, evil clowns, popcorn tracer guns, a balloon search dog, a clown bike, acid bouquets, huge mallets (all the better to bonk prey on the head), a cop turned into a ventriloquist's dummy, and a spaceship resembling a circus tent are all on display. Of all these gags, perhaps the clown car is the funniest, housing as it does a squad of the killer klowns, despite its tiny size. It's a great, silly moment when the clowns pile out, one after the other.

Remove the circus and clown jokes, however, and *Killer Klowns* is but a relatively anonymous, undistinguished little horror movie. It's amusing, but never scary. The characters are cardboard creations, particularly Mooney, a "bad cop" who hates kids as though he escaped from a *Scooby Doo* cartoon. And none of the leads ever express situationally appropriate concern about their discovery near Lover's Lane. "What's a circus tent doing all the way out here?" one character asks early on, and yet goes inside the tent-spaceship anyway, failing to register any real sense of danger.

The real stars of *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* are the remarkable sets, the ghoulish clown costumes (which are creepy), the special effects and the circus-oriented gimmicks and jokes. All of this material is indeed top-notch, beautifully orchestrated and original, but underneath the clown shoes, the silly straws, and the Big Top, there's nothing. But a three-ring circus is all it tries to be, so that's okay.

The Kiss

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Joanna Pacula (Felice); Meredith Salenger (Amy); Mimi Kuzyk (Brenda); Nicholas Kilbertus (Jack); Jan Rubes (Gordon Tobin); Pamela Collyer (Hilary); Peter Dvorsky (Father Joe); Sabrina Boudot (Heather); Shaun Levy (Terry); Dorian Joe Clark (T.C.); Talya Rubin (Young Hilary).

CREW: Tri Star Pictures and Astral Film Enterprises present a Trilogy

Film Production in association with Richard B. Lewis, a Pen Densham film. *Director of Photography*: Francois Protat. *Production Designer*: Ray Forge Smith. *Music*: J. Peter Robinson. *Casting*: Pennie du Pont. *Makeup and Creative Effects*: Chris Walas, Inc. *Film Editor*: Stan Cole. *Executive Producer*: Richard B. Lewis. *Story by*: Stephen Volk. *Screenplay by*: Stephen Volk, Tom Ropelewski. *Produced by*: Pen Densham, John Water. *Directed by*: Pen Densham. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Albany, New York, young Amy's (Salenger) mother Hilary (Collyer) dies in a freak car accident on the day of Amy's Catholic confirmation. Five months later, Amy's aunt—a mysterious jetsetter named Felice (Pacula)—arrives in town with a dark secret and plot going back to her childhood, one involving a strange African talisman and a deadly rite that will allow her to steal the body of someone in her "blood line."

Over Amy's objections, Felice moves in with the family. The girl is suspicious, especially when her best friend Heather (Boudot) gets mangled in a shopping mall escalator and Amy finds her sunglasses in Felice's suit case.

As Felice seduces Jack—Amy's father—and as they make love, Amy—in school—spontaneously begins her period two weeks early. Amy seeks help from a nurse and family friend, Brenda (Kuzyk), who begins to believe her story.

When Amy's boyfriend T.C. (Clark) gets killed by Felice's demonic cat, Brenda confronts Jack, who finally realizes what is going on. Brenda and Jack attempt to save Amy before Felice finishes the ritual that will allow her to stay young by jumping into Amy's body. The final battle occurs pool side, and involves an exploding propane tank, the demonic cat, and a strange, serpentine entity that lives inside Felice.

COMMENTARY: In the spirit of *The Housekeeper* (1985) and *The Stepfather* (1987), the American nuclear family unit is imperiled by an interloper in the fun and furious *The Kiss*. This time, the housewrecker is Felice—a sexy seductress played by Joanna Pacula. She's brought along her malevolent pet cat and her game is to steal the body of a suspicious teenager, Amy.

And it all happens through ... a kiss.

The Kiss is several degrees less serious than the lugubrious *The Housekeeper* and also far campier than *The Stepfather*, reveling as it

does in some dodgy special effects. But that doesn't mean it isn't fun. Director Pen Densham has bloody good fun with some of the horror set pieces, including the classic death-by-escalator. In this sequence, Amy's friend Heather suffers as a necklace she is wearing is trapped in the moving stairs which begin to chew up her face.

When Amy's mom gets run over by a car in the early moments of the film, Densham also stages a gruesome, nasty reveal. Hillary's body is pulled from under the truck and the camera sees that one of her bloody legs is no longer attached to the rest of her. Bye, Mom!

Kudos also to Densham for cross-cutting between Felice and her conquest, Jack, having sex in the kitchen with unsuspecting Amy at school when suddenly she grows agitated and has her entire period in thirty seconds. The early onset of this menstruation is a stigmata of sort, an indication that the family unit has been compromised, and that Amy is going to have to grow up a lot quicker than she could imagine.

Frankly, I'd award three stars to any movie that features Joanna Pacula cravenly fondling (with both hands) an African talisman shaped like a phallus. And I had to laugh when the family re-teams and plots together to kill the evil but gorgeous Felice. Dad, ever the helpful sort, makes love to Felice again as a "distraction" while Brenda rescues Amy from her clutches. That's mighty selfless of you, Dad. No, really.

Finally, *The Kiss*'s climax is positively apocalyptic. While a propane tank spurts fire in the background, Dad and Felice wrestle pool side in the backyard. A ghoulish little demon (yet another phallus) pops out of Felice's mouth and skitters away until Jack grabs it and kills it. It's over the top, bizarre, and spectacular in a cheesy 1980s way. One might contend that in this final battle, Jack is symbolically grabbing his own desire to act lustfully outside of marriage and destroying it. One could also make the claim that the body transfer from Felice to young Amy (heralded by the sudden onset of her period) is the passing of the sexual torch from one generation to another. Both analyses, however, would credit this movie with having way too much intelligence.

Watch *The Kiss* and revel in the moment when the fat demonic cat (which oddly resembles a Critter) gets electrocuted. Enjoy the escalator death, by all means. Just don't expect too much depth here.

Lady in White

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Lady in White was a highly unfashionable distillation of Lewton, *The Uninvited* and Ray Bradbury, beautifully done, with the eponymous ghost resembling *I Walked With a Zombie*'s Jessica Holland crossed with Elizabeth Russell ... *Lady in White*'s reputation should grow with the passing years."—Jeremy Dyson, *Bright Darkness: The Lost Art of the Supernatural Horror Film*, Cassell, 1997, page 257.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lukas Haas (Franklin T. Scarlatti); Len Cariou (Phil); Alex Rocco (Angelo Scarlatti); Katherine Helmond (Amanda); Jason Presson (Geno); Renate Vanni (Mama Assunta); Lucy Lee (Miss La Dell); Sydney Lassick (Mr. Lowry); Angelo Bertolini (Papa Charlie); Joelle Jacobi (Melissa); Jared Rushton (Donald); Gregory Levinson (Louie); Jack Andreozzi (Toni); Rita Zohar (Mrs. Click); Hal Bokar (Mr. Click); Bruno Kirby (Cabbie); Karen Powell (Lady in White).

CREW: *Presented by:* New Sky Productions. *Music:* Frank La Loggia. *Associate Producer:* Carl Reynolds. *Stunt coordinator:* Rawn Hutchinson. *Visual Effects:* Ernest D. Farino, Gene Warren. *Casting:* Lynn Stalmaster. *Costume Designer:* Jacqueline Saint Anne. *Production Designer:* Richard K. Hummel. *Film Editor:* Steve Mann. *Director of Photography:* Russell Carpenter. *Executive Producers:* Cliff Payne, Charles La Loggia. *Producers:* Andrew G. La Marca, Frank La Loggia. *Directed by:* Frank La Loggia. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 113 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the quaint little town of Hollow Point on All Hallow's Eve in 1962, little Frankie Scarlatti (Haas) gets locked in the teacher's cloakroom and spies the ghost of a little girl. He sees her murdered but can't make out the identity of the killer. Then, Frankie is attacked himself and miraculously survives. The police arrest an innocent man, the janitor, for the crime, but Frankie knows this is wrong. There are a number of unsolved child murders in the town and the killer may be someone very familiar to Frankie's family. And then there's the matter of the wandering spirit searching for a missing daughter, the Lady in White.

COMMENTARY: I had never seen this film before 2005, but I'd heard good things about it for a decade. I tracked down a copy, watched it ... and disappointment ensued. This is neither the obscure gem nor the lost treasure you might have hoped. Instead, it's a fitfully charming, mildly entertaining kid's ghost story with some racial elements of *To Kill a Mockingbird* thrown in for good measure. Most of all, *Lady in White* is overly sentimental, a representative from that unfortunate

time in the mid-1980s when the Steven Spielberg aesthetic was king and thus many horror movies featured cute kids, gee whiz special effects and a morally uplifting ending. Call it the Peter Pan syndrome.

Lady in White hopes to trade on warm, good feelings about 20th century Americana. The film proper commences with an adult (a grown-up Frankie) providing emotional voice-over narration, telling the story of his youth. Here, it's a tale from the narrator's home town, in 1962, and the idea is to fill the audience's heart with the warm flush of nostalgia. Frankie's family, which consists of stereotypical "movie" Italians down to their exaggerated accents, is played for affectionate laughs and the movie goes into saccharine overload.

Still, if you can swallow the sugar pill, some nice visuals accompany the wistful introduction. It's Halloween, and there's an autumnal feeling in the air. There are lots of orange shades in the frame, and even a shot or two of falling leaves. Thus the images inform the audience this is a time of change, a time when innocence will be lost and a new spring will follow a dark and cold winter. Yeah, that's cheesy, but it's wistful and inoffensive. The movie follows the changing of the seasons as metaphors for steps in the solving of an important mystery.

During that autumn, cute-as-a-button Frankie, played by Lukas Haas, gets locked in a teacher's closet at school by mean bullies, and sees a phantasm: He witnesses the murder of a missing young girl, but is unable to see the killer's face. All Frankie knows is that the killer likes to hum "Have You Ever Seen a Dream Walking" (last heard over the end credits of a *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*). The closet scene is well-shot, and not without its share of scares. It jumps the shark, however, when a gasping Frankie (choked by the murderer) astral-projects out of his body and flies over a cemetery and the town. These special effects are pretty weak, to put it mildly.

Frankie survives the assault, the black custodian Harold is mistakenly fingered as the culprit, and racism rears its ugly head at formerly peaceful Willow Point. "That black son of a bitch!" yells one character. "Harold Williams is a perfect scapegoat ... he's black," suggests the town sheriff. But of course, Harold is actually that old favorite, off-the-shelf character in horror films, a red herring. So why the film felt it necessary to go down the blind alley of race hatred for a subplot that doesn't bear on the solution of the film's central mystery is anyone's guess. Probably racism is a serious enough topic that it deserves its own movie, rather than serving as suspenseful filler in a movie like *Lady in White*. Again, it might be present simply

because the *To Kill a Mockingbird*-type plot grants the movie a literary feel.

As winter comes in Willow Point, young Frankie wants to solve the riddle of the dead girl. He does eventually. And this is where the movie finally and irrevocably lost me. Franklin ends up in the house of the dead girl's aunt, played by Katherine Helmond. Turns out that the mother of the dead girl, Melissa (who is Helmond's sister), is also dead, and this whole phantasm and mystery has come about for one purpose: to uncover the killer and reunite—in spirit—the separated Melissa and her mom, the spectral Lady in White. Got that?

In a cliffhanger scene (literally) involving terrible process matte work, Frankie comes to understand all of this as he faces off against the real killer. The Lady in White appears at just the precise time to scare the killer down the cliff. Then, because the killer has been fingered and dealt with, Melissa and her mom—looking like glowing angels—are able to reunite as spirits. Melissa even mouths the words “thank you” to Frankie. But, lo and behold, there’s a sting in the tail/tale and the killer isn’t really dead. He’s hanging on. So the spectral reunion was apparently premature.

Lady in White is a pretty movie, but also convoluted and overlong. The story is alternately confusing and predictable, the latter especially during the big reveal wherein Frankie happens into the presence of a guy who innocently begins to hum “Have You Ever Seen a Dream Walking.” The audience will have guessed the killer by then because earlier in the film director La Loggia lays down his cards by featuring an obvious and unmotivated dialogue scene between the killer and Frankie’s dad.

Also, the film’s special effects have not aged well, and the sappy ending will meet with the rebuke (if not outright laughter) of most hardcore genre fans. This is a “horror” movie that only a (grand)mother could love. To quote another 1980s kids’ horror film, *The Monster Squad*, *Lady in White* deserves a big fat kick in the “nards.”

Lair of the White Worm

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“Possibly the strangest strap-on scene in the history of cinema. Too

bad this movie couldn't kill Hugh Grant's career, but you have to give it credit for trying."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Amanda Donohoe (Lady Sylvia Marsh); Hugh Grant (Lord James D'Ampton); Catherine Oxenberg (Eve Trent); Peter Capaldi (Angus Flint); Sammi Davis (Mary Trent); Stratford Johns (Peters); Paul Brooke (P.C. Erny); Imogen Claire (Dorothy Trent); Chris Pitt (Kevin); Gina McKee (Nurse Gladwell); Christopher Gable (Joe Trent); Lloyd Peters (Jesus Christ); Miranda Coe, Linzi Drew, Caron-Anne Kelly, Fiona O'Conner, Caroline Pope, Elisha Scott, Tina Shaw (Maids/Nuns); Paul Eason, James Hicks, David Kiernan, Matthew King, Ross Murray, Andrew Norman, Bob Smith (Soldiers/Witchdoctor); Jackie Russell (Snakewoman).

CREW: Vestron Pictures Present a Ken Russell Film. *Adapted from the novel by:* Bram Stoker. *Costume Designer:* Michael Jeffery. *Sets Designed by:* Anne Tilby. *Film Editor:* Peter Davies. *Music:* Stanislas Syrewicz. *Director of Photography:* Dick Bush. *Executive Producers:* William J. Quigley, Dan Ireland. *Line Producer:* Ronaldo Vasconcellos. *Stunt Coordinator:* Stuart St. Paul, *Choreographer:* Imogen Claire. *Casting:* Gail Stevens. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Jack Lorenz. *Special Makeup and Creature Effects by:* Image Animation. *Screenplay Produced and Directed by:* Ken Russell. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young Scottish archaeologist, Angus Flint (Capaldi) unearths a monstrous snake skull in the back of a rural inn, Mercy House, in England. The inn is run by Eve (Oxenberg) and Mary (Trent), whose parents disappeared a year ago while walking home alone in a dark grove after celebrating a local hero in these parts, Lord D'Ampton, who slew a giant dragon (or "worm") years earlier.

At the nearby Temple House estate, the immortal Lady Sylvia Marsh (Donohoe) continues to worship just such a monstrous white snake, who lives in the nearby caverns. She feeds the beast human sacrifices, and has set her sites on Mary, the reincarnation of a nun who once built her convent upon Marsh's snake temple. Angus, Mary and the current Lord D'Ampton (Grant) team to rescue Mary from being devoured, unaware that Sylvia has spawned a legion of snake vampire acolytes, all of whom will defend her—and her worm god—to the death.

COMMENTARY: Combine Ken Russell's penchant for trippy, religious

imagery (see: *Altered States* [1980]), a snake motif including a half-dozen jokes about the serpents, a historical parallel (on the St. George vs. the Dragon story) and actress Amanda Donohoe as a sexy, evil siren and you've got *Lair of the White Worm*, a rollicking adaptation of a Bram Stoker novel that, one senses, is all in good fun.

Snake jokes and images dominate this Russell film, and we all know what a snake represents, right? A phallic symbol. Thus a game of "Snakes and Ladders" appears in the film. Thus one hallucinatory vision features a snake coiling around Jesus on the cross as Roman soldiers rape naked nuns from a convent. Thus, in a dream, while Eve and Amanda wrestle, Hugh Grant's character's magic marker—perched in his lap—raises like a snake at attention ... or an erection.



Snakes alive! Amanda Donohue has very sharp fangs in Ken Russell's *Lair of the White Worm* (1988).

The snake as fertility symbol–phallus recurs in imagery so randy I blush writing about it. Donohoe penetrates Eve with a giant dildo to detect if she's a virgin. In another scene, Donohoe's *femme fatale* fellates and strokes a bloody phallus before our eyes. In fact, Donohoe, as Lady Sylvia, may just be the film's most valuable player, an icon among of 1980s boogeymen. She lures Kevin to her house. There she bathes the young man and then bites him on the penis, paralyzing

him. Later, she uses him as a sacrifice. Did I mention that in this scene Donohoe adorns the traditional costume of a dominatrix, replete with bikini bottom and high boots?

Lair of the White Worm includes everything from snake porno on the TV to a funny, lighthearted tone. It's a horror movie through and through, but unlike the dazzling *Altered States* or the slightly pretentious *Gothic*, *Lair of the White Worm* doesn't take itself very seriously. There's precious little to read into this jaunty, occasionally jolting adventure, because the image of giant white worms slipping in and out of cavernous mountain caves is hardly one that needs detailed analysis, does it?

Maniac Cop



Cast and Crew

CAST: Tom Atkins (Detective MacRae); Bruce Campbell (Jack Forrest); Laurene Landon (Theresa Mallory); Richard Roundtree (Commissioner Pike); Robert Z'Dar (Matt Cordell); Nina Aversen (Regina Sheperd); Nick Barbaro (Councilman); Lou Bonacki (Detective); Victoria Caitlin (Ellen Forrest); Jim Dixon (Clancy); Corey Eubanks (Bremmer); Jill Gatsby (Cassie Philips); Rocky Giordani (Fowler); Erik Holland (Dr. Gruber); Jake La Motta (Detective); Sam Raimi (Parade Reporter); George Buck Flower (Old Man).

CREW: Shapiro Glickenhaus Entertainment presents a Larry Cohen production of a William Lustig Film. *Casting:* Geno Havens. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Frank Isaac. *Music:* Jay Chattaway. *Film Editor:* David Kern. *Director of Photography:* Vincent J. Rabe. *Co-Producer:* Jeff Richard. *Executive Producer:* James Glickenhaus. *Stunt Coordinator:* Spiro Razatos. *Written and produced by:* Larry Cohen. *Directed by:* William Lustig. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Detective MacRae (Atkins) investigates the murder of his friend, a bartender named Cassie (Gatsby). Two Puerto Rican muggers claim she was murdered by a massive, hulking police officer in Central Park. After three more murders by the killer dubbed "The Maniac Cop," one cop's wife suspects that her husband Jack (Campbell) is the culprit. Instead, she discovers he is having an affair with a fellow officer, Theresa (Landon) ... and his spouse is brutally murdered by the killer cop.

The maniac cop goes after Theresa, but MacRae saves her at the last instant. MacRae follows the trail of the maniac cop to Matt Cordell (Z'Dar), a highly decorated “super cop” who was believed to have died after being indicted and sent to prison with the very men he put away. But the truth is stranger than that. Cordell didn’t die, and now he has an axe to grind against the cops—and the mayor—who betrayed him.

COMMENTARY: A great B-movie cast (including Bruce Campbell and the incomparable Tom Atkins), as well as a clever script from Larry Cohen, help enliven *Maniac Cop*, a low-budget effort directed with both guns blazing by William Lustig.

Every now and then, *Maniac Cop* teeters towards incompetence (such as a shot with a boom mike hanging low in the frame) but the movie is so manic, so much fun, and creates such a compelling origin for a new screen monster (Cordell as the maniac cop) that any horror fan will forgive the effort these mild trespasses.

Bolstered by an irresistible ad-line (“You have the right to remain silent ... forever”), *Maniac Cop* stars Tom Atkins in the role he was born to play. He’s a cop who’s a little dissolute, a little dark, a little funny, but deeply honest, and the actor is perfect in this hard-boiled *noir* mode. It’s just a shame his character dies halfway in. Bruce Campbell ably picks up the mantel of hero, and he’s in fine, athletic shape here, though notably less sarcastic in demeanor than in his outings as Ash.

Finally, Richard Roundtree and William Smith make perfect villains: corrupt officials whose “transgression” has created a monster in Matt Cordell. On the “don’t worry, be happy” surface, they appear as normal, upstanding people, but on the “be afraid, be very afraid” underside of things, they’re betrayers and liars.

Z'Dar plays Cordell and he's physically imposing and perfect as a new franchise's "bogeyman." The Maniac Cop himself shows how an organizing principle can be applied to a villain. Being a New York cop, the villain can pose as a real cop, and in an opening montage, the audience sees that he has all the accoutrements you'd expect of an officer: a gun, handcuffs, etc. The movie plays with the idea of expectations too. A cop should be a good guy, protecting and serving the innocent, but in this case, he's a menace.

It's easy to see why *Maniac Cop* developed into a franchise. It features good actors (and a cameo by Sam Raimi), a taut story, a memorable, easily identified villain with a sense of righteousness in his cause, and

a fast pace. Some good stunts, including a van crash, dominate the climax, and the film even appears to have been shot amidst a genuine St. Patrick's Day Parade. This is good, solid low-budget horror filmmaking, even if, perhaps, it isn't psychologically deep or sociologically interesting enough to register it as one of the greats of the decade.

LEGACY: Cordell returned to haunt video rentals in two sequels, 1990's *Maniac Cop 2* and *Maniac Cop 3: Badge of Honor* (1993).

Miracle Mile



Cast and Crew

CAST: Anthony Edwards (Harry Washallo); Mare Winningham (Julie Peters); Mykel T. Williamson (Wilson); Denise Crosby (Landa); Kelly Minter (Charlotta); John Agar (Ivan Peters); Lou Hancock (Lucy Peters); Kurt Fuller (Gerstead); Robert Doqui (Cook); O-Lan Jones (Waitress); Claude Earl Jones (Harlan); Alan Rosenberg (Mike); Earl Boen (Drunk); Diane Delano (Stewardess); Jose Mercado (Bus Boy); Raphael Sbarge (Chip); Brian Thompson (Power Lifter); Peter Berg (Band Member); Jenette Goldstein (Beverly Hills Chick #1).

CREW: *Presented by:* MGM. *Casting:* Laurel Lloyd, Billy Da Mota. *Music:* Tangerine Dream. *Film Editors:* Stephen Semel, Kathie Weaver. *Production Designer:* Christopher Horner. *Director of Photography:* Theo Van de Sande. *Co-Producer:* Graham Cottle. *Producers:* John Daly, Derek Gibson. *Written and Directed by:* Steve De Jarnatt. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Shortly after meeting the girl of his dreams, Julie (Winningham), at a museum in Los Angeles, thirty-year-old romantic schmuck Harry Washallo (Edwards) sleeps through a late-night date when power in his building goes out and his alarm doesn't wake him up. Upset that he missed the date, Harry heads to the corner diner, his rendezvous point with Julie, three hours late.

However, once at the diner, Harry picks up a ringing phone in the booth outside the establishment, hoping it's Julie. It isn't. It's Chip, a soldier stationed in a missile silo in North Dakota. He's called a wrong number, but doesn't know it, and blurts out to Harry that America has launched a first, pre-emptive strike at its enemies with nuclear missiles. A devastating response is expected in an hour. When Harry

hears Chip gunned down by superiors, he knows the story is no hoax.

With an hour left to flee Los Angeles, an “overkill” zone in any nuclear war, Harry informs the diner patrons of the danger. An efficient businesswoman, Landa (Crosby), promptly begins making plans for an evacuation to Antarctica, where there’s no rainfall and clean water to last for generations. She plots an escape from downtown Los Angeles in a helicopter, and then a short jaunt to LAX, where they’ll fly to Antarctica.

Harry signs on this plan, but he needs to rescue Julie, and the others don’t want to wait. He strikes off on his own, promising to meet the others at a rooftop helo-port nearby before they leave. Panicked, Harry goes in search of Julie, telling everyone he meets that nuclear Armageddon is just an hour away.

COMMENTARY: The ultimate in 1980s paranoia trips, the taut, compelling and downright upsetting *Miracle Mile* exploits society’s fear of a nuclear war (in which America strikes first!) to tell a harrowing story about human nature.

Miracle Mile is short and sweet, lasting just 87 minutes and focusing on one character who may just be Chicken Little, screaming to the heavens that “the sky is falling.” This is a particular problem for Harry, the Cassandra figure who is sometimes believed and sometimes ignored for a very important reason. If he’s right about the phone call from the missile silo, the end of the world is coming. If he’s wrong, however, he’s engendered city-wide panic, and the consequences are dead police, two dead citizens (Wilson and his sister, Charlotta), fires, looting and utter panic. In this regard, *Miracle Mile* concerns the importance of one voice, and how a single, terrifying story can spread from one person to another at a velocity approaching light speed. The great thing about *Miracle Mile* is that it plays its cards close to the vest. The audience is left hanging in uncertainty to the very end, and doesn’t know if the threat of nuclear war is real or merely a hoax.

Underscored by a hard-driving soundtrack that pushes each scene, *Miracle Mile* dramatizes the full panoply of human behavior in regards to a crisis. Everybody reacts differently to the specter of sudden, certain death, and a picture of the species is forged. Landa, played by Denise Crosby, is a “fixer,” immediately attempting to organize an escape from the city to Antarctica of all places. She begins dealing in figures, logistics and so forth, even though her plan is farfetched. At least it gives her something to do in the crisis, rather than being left to feel helpless about it.

The character played by Claude Earl Jones takes another tack. He's a blue collar character who tells dirty jokes every morning at the diner before going to work. He learns of the crisis and what does he do? He ignores it, heading to his job as a city street sweeper. Denial is his *modus operandi*.

Then there's Ivan and Lucy Peters, Julie's elderly grandparents. When they learn of the coming nuclear strike, they decide it's better to face the end without panic, with a sense of grace. They decide to spend their last morning in each other's company (after a long estrangement), sharing their favorite breakfast. Again, this is not cowardice or denial so much as it is a reckoning that they've lived good lives, and if this is how it ends, well, then so be it.

Finally, there's Harry, a man who admits he never "saw the big picture" before his last day on Earth. He has the chance to attempt an escape with Landa, but he cannot leave behind true love, and instead of racing to escape the city, stays behind to find and rescue Julie. This is a foolish, human decision, given what's coming, especially as time is of the essence, but love is a critical part of the human equation. Like Wilson, who must go in search of his sister before fleeing L.A., and the homosexual power lifter played by Brian Thompson, a man who must bring his lover along, Harry understands that it isn't worth living if you're without the one you love. Perhaps this emotional decision actually makes a sort of sense. Escape isn't likely anyway, so maybe it's better, in the final analysis, to cling to the ones you love and die with honor intact.

Meanwhile, as Harry and Julie navigate their way through the streets, panic sets in. Time's a wastin', as they're foiled in one turn after another. The panic is depicted well in *Miracle Mile*, as car accidents proliferate and fires burn out of control. In one disturbing image, a character (Wilson) runs futilely up a down escalator, carrying his sister's body. It's the human equivalent of a chicken running with his head cut off.

And then comes the climactic nuclear strike. In beautiful, terrifying images, missiles streak over Los Angeles, heading for their targets. The morning sky lights up, and Judgment Day arrives. Why? The great thing about *Miracle Mile* is that it doesn't matter.

"Why?" a character asks.

"I don't know why," Harry replies, and that's as political as the film gets.

This is a street-level dramatization of nuclear war, one where the people are left to their own devices while craven politicians, sitting in their Washington D.C. offices, make terrible decisions. A movie like this one grows directly out of the citizenry's fear in the 1980s that President Reagan truly believed his own dangerous rhetoric: nuclear missiles could be recalled once launched; nuclear war was winnable.

As audience pulses race, *Miracle Mile* speeds to its unforgiving, uncompromising conclusion. Harry and Julie are in the air (flying in a helicopter) when the missiles strike. The electro magnetic pulse of the detonation scuttles the helicopter and it spins down into the La Brea Tar Pit, where they will drown. In a claustrophobic scene, as their chamber fills with watery tar, Julie panics, trying to escape, and Harry—the romantic—stops her. “There’s nothing up there,” he tells her gently, making her see their situation. Then he puts things into perspective, and says that maybe, in a thousand years, they’ll be found there, just like man found the bones of the woolly mammoth.

Miracle Mile has prepared beautifully for this conclusion. For over the opening credits, the film depicts Julie and Harry’s first meeting at the Museum of Natural History at the tar pits. A demonstration film is showcased, discussing evolution and the beginning of life on Earth. It has taken tens of thousands of years to reach this point of civilization, that brief film reminds us, and then the film cuts to several exhibits. On hand are mastadons and saber-tooth tigers, two species that haven’t survived. The inevitable question is, will man suffer the same fate? Worse, will man destroy himself in a blinding, searing moment of hate because we can’t accept the ideological differences of a competitive nation? Has all this time—all this evolution—come to this?

Strangely, given the futility of nuclear war, *Miracle Mile*’s climax puts things in perspective in a way that almost makes the death of the characters palatable. This is the cycle of life and the way of the world, the film seems to understand. The Neanderthals disappeared, and so did the mammoths, and now man takes his place among those relics of the past. Those whom the gods destroy...

“It’s the insects’ turn,” Harry notes grimly, alluding to the fact that likely only cockroaches could survive a planet-wide nuclear holocaust. That’s a grim thought, but one superseded by Julie’s affirmation of the human spirit—even in the face of stupid, self-destructive decisions.

“If you weren’t with me, that would be Hell,” she says. If hate is profoundly human, the touching and riveting *Miracle Mile* reminds us,

so is love.

Hopefully that quality won't be just another relic, an exhibit in a museum, for some future age.

Monkey Shines



Critical Reception

“Romero knows how to build suspense and his directing on *Monkey Shines* is first-rate. But [his] screenplay ... could have used some help ... Romero manages to get some real scares out of specific scenes ... Unfortunately, he throws it all away with a couple of climactic moments that are just too ridiculous...”—Christopher Hicks, “Hokey *Monkey Shines* Looks Like Just So Much Monkeying Around,” *The Deseret News*, July 29, 1988, page W6.

“George A. Romero does a standard horror film, and if anything, the problem is it's, well, standard. The story's not all that exciting, and while it's always a pleasure to see Christine Forrest-Romero getting some acting work, star Jason Beghe is drab, and the film never quite takes off. If this had been directed by anyone else, we'd probably think it was good, but you know us, we just expect the world from you, George.”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jason Beghe (Allan Mann); John Pankow (Geoffrey Fisk); Kate McNeil (Melanie Parker); Joyce Van Patten (Dorothy Mann); Christine Forrest(Maryanne); Stephen Root (Dean Burrage); Stanley Tucci (Dr. John Wiseman); Janine Turner (Linda Aikman); Boo (Ella).

CREW: A Charles Evans Production, a George A. Romero Film.
Casting: Dianne Crittenden. *Monkeys Trained by:* Alison Paskow. *Special Makeup Effects by:* Tom Savini. *Assistant Director:* Nick Mastandrea. *Costume Designer:* Barbara Anderson. *Production Designer:* Cletus Anderson. *Associate Producer:* Peter Macintosh. *Music:* David Shire. *Film Editor:* Pasquale Buba. *Director of Photography:* James A. Contner. *Based on the novel “Monkey Shines” by:* Michael Stewart. *Executive Producers:* Peter Gunwald, Gerald S. Paonessa. *Directed by:* George A. Romero. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 116 minutes.

INCANTATION: “That’s what the Devil is, animal instinct. It lives in us all. It lives by its own set of laws. The law of the jungle.”—A discussion of man’s nature—and the beast’s—in George Romero’s *Monkey Shines*.

SYNOPSIS: An athletic young law student, Allan Mann (Beghe), is struck by a truck while jogging and becomes a quadriplegic. His friend Jeffrey (Pankow), a scientist working at the university to improve the intelligence of monkeys (by utilizing human memory cells), arranges for one of his prized capuchins, Ella (Boo) to be trained by animal specialist Melanie Parker (McNeil) as Alan’s companion and hands. Allan and Ella become so close that it alienates Allan’s mother (Van Patten) and the nurse (Forrest) who cares for him. Even worse, Ella begins to act out Allan’s animal rage and impulses as he sees through her eyes in nightmares.

When Allan’s former girlfriend Linda (Turner) dumps him and has an affair with his spinal doctor, the obnoxious and self-important Dr. Wiseman (Tucci), Ella acts for the disabled man, seeing to it that they both die in a fire. Allan comes to realize that he and Ella are sharing a symbiotic relationship, and grows fearful that the monkey will feel territoriality and jealousy when he begins a romantic relationship with Melanie.

COMMENTARY: George Romero’s “living dead” movies are amongst the best horror films ever made, and yet, somehow, it’s always rewarding to watch his work when the director gets away from the material that made him famous. It’s thrilling to seem him explore some other aspect of human behavior and nature. *Jack’s Wife* (1971), *The Crazies* (1973) and *Martin* (1976) are three fascinating movies that held up a mirror to America in the disco decade, vetting topics such as boredom and trends in suburbia, martial law and government overreach, and even the romance of movies vs. the unromantic nature of real life.



35-30

Ella, the monkey. From *Monkey Shines* (1988). Photograph by Christopher Call.

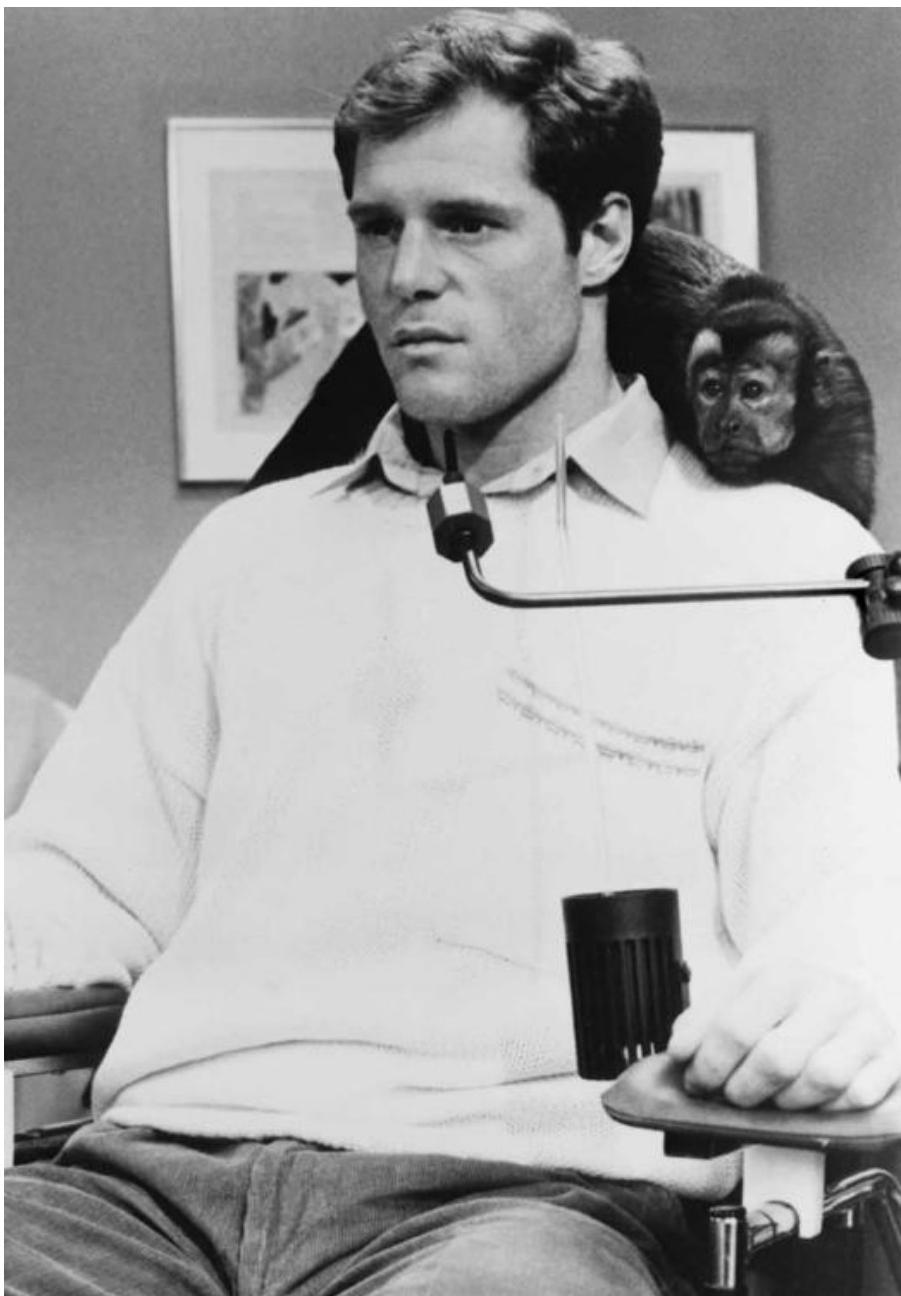
Because Romero often also edited these early films, he exerted an auteur-like control over each narrative. These movies are not perfect by any means, and some scenes in each are badly paced or overdone, but Romero's work nonetheless universally provides food for thought. His films are undeniably a result of his aesthetic, and that's a compliment; his horrors are usually also as much social commentary as terror traps, and so the artist deserves recognition as a film intellectual.

Which brings us to Romero's three horror films of the 1980s. *Creepshow* (1982) is an enjoyable and scary homage to EC Comics but, on the whole, lightweight. *Day of the Dead* finds the talent back on his familiar terrain, directing a zombie movie. So, for all intents and purposes, *Monkey Shines* represents his only opportunity to craft a horror movie outside the bailiwick of expectations.

Fortunately, Romero is up to this challenge in a fascinating movie that gazes at animal rights, but more importantly debates human and animal nature. Watching the film, one is never certain if the murderous monkey is doing her master's bidding, or vice versa. Ella is either a Hyde to Allan Mann's Jekyll, a representation of his angry id out of control, or animal nature superimposed and expressed through an unwitting but "open" human.

The film provides no easy answers about that equation, but a close reading seems to suggest that Ella serves as an outlet for Mann to express his rage. At some point, he's over that rage, but he's funneled so much hatred through her that she can't stop her bloody acts. Still, it's easy to look at him as the source of the evil. He's ultimately healed by his love for Melanie (and there's a wild oral sex scene in the film), but Mann never loves Ella enough to heal her.

Monkey Shines sets up an ironclad case for Allan's rage. In the first scenes, before the accident that leaves Allan paralyzed, Romero takes special care to explore what Allan loses. The camera reveals him exercising nude on the floor highlighting his muscular, athletic physique. He leaves behind a gorgeous woman in bed (*Northern Exposure*'s Janine Turner), an obvious perk of his youth, vitality and good looks. When he goes out running, it's in a picturesque, temperate urban community, a kind of modern American paradise. He runs with bricks in his backpack, a fascinating, artificial way of enhancing his strength and building his muscles, since he doesn't have a job or life that requires him to be strong. His early morning jog reveals Allan's prosperity, health and even freedom. Nothing fetters his existence—it's perfect.



He's got a monkey on his back. Literally. Allan Mann (Jason Beghe) and Ella make quite a team in *Monkey Shines*. Photograph by Myles Aronowitz.

Then the accident comes, and Allan loses everything. His girlfriend

leaves him (he can no longer perform sexually, after all), he can no longer enjoy exercise because of his paralysis, and what's more he's now limited to the indoors. His freedom has been taken away and he attempts suicide because he doesn't "want to live like Robby the Robot." Worse, an overbearing mother and a truly nasty live-in nurse make all of his decisions for him. In a relatively short span, Allan goes from being a stud and paragon of physical beauty to essentially a very large infant. His mother even needs to bathe him now, and it's nothing short of humiliating.

When Ella, now altered by a mad scientist, Geoffrey, comes into the house as Allan's "slave," she immediately bonds with him. They develop a relationship and become so close that her enhanced brain begins to pick up his thoughts and anticipate his needs. Allan's alter ego, she even indulges his desire to escape the wheelchair. By night, she flees the house and runs amok, and Allan realizes he's "getting out with her." Then, she starts to kill. But again, it seems that she does so not because she's jealous (though she might be), but because Allan has poured all of his toxic emotions into her. One can't really blame her for becoming a monster.

Allan's name is "Mann," and that's a quick clue that this is a man vs. nature or animal story, yet *Monkey Shines* is also a Mann vs. himself story, because Allan comes to realize that human instinct is the same as animal instinct. Ella and he share the same emotions, and that there's an unhealthy symbiosis involved. When he eventually sheds himself of Ella's influence, she's left to feel like a discarded mate ... no longer loved or appreciated.

Monkey Shines is a convincing and compelling because Ella is depicted so realistically throughout. She is truly amazing, and there is a minimum of trickery involved regarding her, at least until the violence (and hypodermic injections) become frequent. Ultimately, the film goes a little off the rails during the finale, when Allan takes Ella in his mouth and starts flinging her around there, his head going from side to side. It's painfully obvious that the monkey is a prop, not the genuine article. Also, the film's ending, which finds Allan healthy and sturdy and no longer paralyzed, is pure Hollywood fabrication. The right ending for the film would have found Allan dealing with his tragedy, but embarking on a different kind of fulfilled life at law school and with his new girlfriend, Melanie. Instead, *Monkey Shines* goes for the requisite happy ending, and frankly, the story doesn't earn that. It's not true.

Monkey Shines is a harrowing and fascinating film, if not on a par with

The Crazies or *Martin*. There is, however, one undeniably great moment that reveals the relationship between Ella and Allan without words. Rage-filled, Ella urinates on Alan's lap, marking him as her territory. In a sense, she has a right to him, as he has shared too much with her in the first place. Still, the image is raw and right, unlike the film's cop-out ending.

Moontrap



Cast and Crew

CAST: Walter Koenig (Commander Jason Grant); Bruce Campbell (Ray Tanner); Leigh Lombardi (Mera); Robert Kurcz (Koreman); John J. Saunders (Barnes); Reavis Graham (Haskell); Judy Levitt (Intrepid Commander); Tom Case (Beck); Reuben Yabuku (Intrepid Pilot); Doug Childs (Grant's Son); James Courtney (Lieutenant); Tony Abruzzo (Soldier #1); Tom Whalen (Soldier #2).

CREW: Shapiro Glickenhaus Entertainment Presents a Magic Films Production of a Robert Dyke Film. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Frank Isaac. *Associate Producer:* Stephen Roberts. *Co-Producer:* John Cameron. *Music:* Joseph Lo Duca. *Special Effects:* Acme Special Effects. *Film Editors:* Steven C. Craig, Kevin Tent. *Production Design:* B.J. Taylor. *Director of Photography:* Peter Klein. *Executive Producers:* James A. Courtney, Brian C. Manoogian, Alan M. Solomon. *Screenplay:* Tex Ragsdale. *Produced and Directed by:* Robert Dyke. *MPAA Rating:* NR. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The space shuttle *Camelot*, manned by Jason Grant (Koenig) and Ray Tanner (Campbell), unexpectedly makes radar contact with a gigantic alien derelict spaceship. Grant does a space walk to the vessel and discovers a 14,000-year-old human corpse and a strange, football-sized alien seed. Upon return to Earth, the seed opens in a NASA laboratory and begins assimilating technology there to create a monstrous, inhuman (and murderous) automaton. Believing there is more machinery of this type on the moon, Grant and Tanner lead a mission there, only to find an ancient human base on the lunar surface. Inside, they find a beautiful woman, Mera (Lombardi), frozen in stasis. She tells of mankind's battle (as slaves) against the mechanical overlords. And worse, there are more of these mechanical monstrosities.

COMMENTARY: The straight-to-video *Moontrap* is a cheapjack knock-off of *Lifeforce* in many ways, featuring an alien derelict that slips into Earth orbit and poses a transformational threat to humankind. It is shot and edited more like a syndicated TV series than an honest-to-goodness movie, relying primarily on stagy two-shots, medium-shots and close-ups, and consequently there's no sense of scope, even in the outer space sequences, which should feel sweeping and impressive.

Walter Koenig, *Star Trek*'s Mr. Chekov, gives what can only politely be termed a TV-sized performance too, in the role of an aging astronaut disappointed to learn that he's just an orbital truck driver. Koenig's style is pure hambone, as though he's trying to channel William Shatner ... and failing big-time. Watching this film, one understands why Koenig never emerged from the background on *Star Trek*: the performer simply has neither the charisma nor stature to serve as a leading man. The always-dependable Bruce Campbell seems to realize he's in trouble playing second fiddle to Pavel Chekov, and does his snarky best with the iffy material. He also hams it up (especially in a drunk scene), but seems noticeably relieved when his sidekick character expires ... with a maniacal cackle, no less.

Moontrap's primary menace is a self-replicating machine organism, not unlike the Borg, which springs up from a small seed that resembles either a plastic loaf of bread, or a football, depending on the view. The alien robot assimilates all the technology around it and becomes a menacing, oversized creation. On first appearance, the robot appears rather impressive, dwarfing the surrounding corridor and firing lightning bolts willy-nilly. But then, on closer inspection, the creature appears fairly immobile, like a toy Go-Bot or Transformer. Its head swivels around a bit, and the arms move up and down, but not much else seems to move, so chalk that up as a disappointment too.

Later in the film, stop-motion animated tentacles grab an obviously miniature lunar lander model, and all sense of reality is further diminished. For that matter, when Koenig and Campbell reach the moon (a journey *Moontrap* is too cheap to dramatize), they don't even adjust their gait to try to simulate the gravity on the lunar surface.

As the film wears on, it gets worse. Once the crew reaches the moon, all narrative momentum seems to stop, and audiences are introduced to a love interest for Koenig, a moon lady by the name of Mera. She and Koenig's character apparently share the universal language of love, but the actors have precious little chemistry.

The idea behind *Moontrap*, that humans could be "spare parts" for

robot overlords, is indeed fascinating, and has been further examined in the genre in such films as *First Contact* (1996) and even *The Matrix* (1999). Maybe there would have been a deeper concentration on that element of the tale in the intended sequel, which *Moontrap* futilely sets up in its closing minutes.

Night of the Demons



Cast and Crew

CAST: Alvin Alexis (Rodger); Allison Baron (Helen); Lance Fenton (Jay); William Gallo (Sal); Hal Harris (Stooge); Mimi Kinkade (Angela); Cathy Podewell (Judy); Linnea Quigley (Suzanne); Philip Tanzini (Man); Jill Terashita (Frannie); Harold Ayer (Old Man); Karel Ericson (Judy's Mother); Bonnie Jeffcoat Jr. (Bily); Marie Denn (Old Man's Wife); James W. Quinn (Demon Voices).

CREW: Paragon Arts International Presents a Kevin Tenney Film. *Executive Producer:* Walter Josten. *Supervising Producer:* Jeff Geoffrey. *Associate Producers:* Rene Torres, Patricia Bando Josten. *Production Supervisor:* Jackson Harvey. *Line Producer:* Don Robinson. *Art Director:* Ken Nichole. *Casting Director:* Tedra Gabriel. *Film Editor:* Daniel Duncan. *Music:* Dennis Michael Tenney. *Sound Design:* Lee Haxall. *Special Makeup Effects designed and created by:* Steve Johnson. *Director of Photography:* David Lewis. *Written and produced by:* Joe Augstyn. *Directed by:* Kevin S. Tenney. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A fetching young witch named Angela (Kinkade) throws a Halloween party at an old funeral home known in the neighborhood as "Hull House." She and her friends, including party crasher Sal (Gallo), on-the-make stud Jay (Fenton), sexy Suzanne (Quigley), stupid Stooge (Harris), virginal Judy (Podewell) and the token black friend, Rodger (Alexis), hold a past-life séance with a mirror, but a horrible demon leaps into Suzanne and possesses her soul, transforming her into a hideous beast. Before long, Suzanne passes the curse onto the others, starting with Angela. As the party-goers are turned into psychotic demons, the teens' numbers dwindle fast. Finally, only Judy and Rodger survive, but after escaping a crematorium they must scale the high brick wall surrounding isolated Hull House. And the only way over that wall is a barbed-wire chain.

COMMENTARY: The cheaply made *Night of the Demons* is part *Evil Dead* (1983), with its concentration on youngsters turned into raving, drooling demons, and part *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), with a concentration on a punk nihilistic and cynical aesthetic. Unfortunately, the film isn't nearly as adept as either of those sterling models, and is in fact rather ineptly presented at times.

A low budget on a horror film can either prove an inspiration, a hurdle which makes the filmmakers cleverer by spades; or a deficit, resulting in a final cut that is less than adequate. The latter is the case here, alas. For instance, director Kevin S. Tenney is unable to provide any sense of the funeral home's architecture or lay-out. It's the central locale of the film but it is never established fully in exterior, except as a painting(!), and so it's difficult to know where we are, or understand the geography of the terrain. Knowing where the rooms connect, where the stairs are, and how to escape to the crematorium are all things that viewers need to comprehend, especially in a siege-type movie such as *Night of the Demons*, and that understanding is missing here.

The acting never rises above the plateau of dreadful. The characters stand about awkwardly, flatly reciting exposition, their delivery both two-dimensional and hackneyed. Again, acting in a horror movie need not be Shakespearean, but it should prove convincing enough for viewers to believe that these party kids exist as sentient entities. These performances fail that smell test, and Linnea Quigley spends the first twenty-five minutes of the film wriggling her buttocks before drooling teen boys like a mountain gorilla seeking a mate. Suffice it to say, these performances don't represent a high water mark for anybody.

Tenney attempts some interesting stylistic touches, and these moments are all that keep *Night of the Demons* afloat for its ninety-minute running time. For example, after a demon flies into Suzanne's mouth, Tenney's camera goes around in a circle as each character speaks, the camera spin indicating a kind of desperation and confusion. Later, when Angela is possessed, she performs an erotic dance routine to the accompaniment of punk rock music and flashy strobe lighting. Tenney captures this action with jump cuts, and again, one feels the film is working hard to achieve a sense of style and a rhythm. But one has to acknowledge that *Evil Dead* and *Return of the Living Dead* both achieve style and pace in a way far superior to this film, so they represent superior viewing choices.

Appropriately, considering the genre, the most effective portion of *Night of the Demons* involves the escape from the funeral home and the

nail-biting ascent over a wall (replete with barbed wire) during the climax. Our final girl Judy's hands are bloodied and gored by the barbed wire, while demonic hands pull and tug at her clothing, attempting to impede her progress. This is the kind of moment you might find in any George Romero zombie film, but it is accomplished with a modicum of skill here.

Thematically, *Night of the Demons* doesn't pause much to consider its premise for this demon stomp, particularly that the land on which the funeral home was built is "unclean." So, in a sense, this is essentially the same movie as *Bloody New Year*: a runaround featuring a bunch of kids in an isolated setting, replete with some gore and inventive killings. Regarding the murders, this author's favorites involves Suzanne (Quigley) having sexual intercourse with Jay (Fenton) while demon-possessed. She complains he's looking at her body and then—in response—pushes in his eyeballs. In a scene like that, *Night of the Demons* perfectly exploits the idea that adolescent sex is both tantalizing and frightening.

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"[B]y far the best of the series, a superior horror picture that balances wit and gore with imagination and intelligence. It very effectively mirrors the anxieties of the teenage audience for which it is primarily intended."—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1988, page 17.

"So begins the descent of the premier 1980s horror icon into a wise-cracking stereotype of what's scary. It all starts getting a little too polished, and a little too predictable. Freddy starts wandering off his mission of getting us in our dreams and starts trying to get out into the real world again, or is that the next film? Who can tell? Is there a difference between these films at this point in the series?"—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger); Rodney Eastman (Joey); Danny Hassel (Dan); Andras Jones (Rick); Tuesday Knight (Kristen); Ken Sagoes (Kincaid); Lisa Wilcox (Alice); Brooke Bundy (Elaine); Nicholas Mele (Johnson); Toy Newkirk (Sheila); Brooke Theiss

(Debbie); Kirsten Clayton (Little Girl); Duane Davis (Jock); Richard Garrison (Doctor); Jeff Levine (Paramedic); Joanna Lipari (Nurse); Jacquelyn Masche (Joey's Mom).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Heron Communications Inc., and Smart Egg Pictures Present a Robert Shaye production of a Renny Harlin film. **Casting:** Annette Benson. **Special Visual Effects:** Dream Quest Images. **Mechanical Special Effects by:** Image Engineering. **Freddy Krueger Makeup:** Kevin Yagher. **Makeup Effects by:** Steve Johnson, Screaming Mad George, Magical Media Industries, Inc., and R. Christopher Biggs. **Music:** Craig Safan. **Film Editors:** Michael Knue, Chuck Weiss. **Production Designers:** Mick and C.J. Strawn. **Director of Photography:** Steven Fierburg. **Executive Producers:** Sara Risher, Stephen Diener. **Story:** William Kotzwinkle, Brian Helgeland. **Screenplay:** Brian Helgeland, Scott Pierce. **Producers:** Robert Shaye, Rachel Talalay. **Stunt Coordinator:** Rick Barker. **"Nightmare"** performed by: Tuesday Knight. **"Are You Ready for Freddy"** written and performed by: The Fat Boys. **"I Want Your Hands on Me"** written and performed by: Sinead O'Connor. **Based on characters created by:** Wes Craven. **Directed by:** Renny Harlin. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Ever take a look at our town’s history? It’s not exactly a safe place to be a teenager.”—Future Freddy fodder states the obvious in *The Dream Master*.

SYNOPSIS: Kristen (Knight) is obsessed with Freddy Krueger, even though she and the surviving dream warriors Kincaid (Sagoes) and Joey (Eastman) destroyed him with the help of Nancy Thompson. Her fears prove well-founded when Kincaid dreams of Freddy’s graveyard (an auto salvage yard) and his dog pisses on Freddy’s bones, thus unhallowing the ground and reviving the dream demon.

Freddy dispatches Kincaid and Joey with ease, but before finishing off Kristen, allows her to pull her new friend Alice into the dream, and transfers her dream power to the young teen. Now Freddy has access to a new group of teens, through Alice. But both he and Alice are unaware that she is more than a dream warrior, but actually the dream master, a guardian of the “positive” dream gate and Freddy’s equal.

As Freddy kills each of her friends, including her brother Rick (Jones), Alice absorbs each of the deceased’s dream powers (including kung-fu, technical ingenuity, and physical fitness) and preps for the final battle with Krueger. And she has to win, because her boyfriend Dan (Hassel) is going into surgery, and under anesthesia, he’ll be defenseless before

Krueger.

COMMENTARY: “I am eternal,” Freddy Krueger quips near the finale of his fourth and most extravagant and financially successful outing yet. There is no reason to doubt Mr. Krueger’s word—and indeed, Freddy continues to return to the cinema ... as late as 2004!

As for this installment, *A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* is a shallow, slick, internally inconsistent cheesy slice of horror pizza (replete with the souls of children as a yummy topping). Renny Harlin’s film continues the questionable process of degrading Freddy from ghoulish, shadowy monster and child molester to up-front pop culture icon. And yet—in some ham-handed fashion—the film also serves as development for the horror genre and women’s roles. It boasts a truly fascinating final girl in Alice, a diffident character who undergoes the process of self-actualization before the audience’s eyes. She’s Freddy’s best nemesis since Nancy Thompson in the first film, and these films are always more successful when there’s a protagonist to give Freddy a run for his money.

Unfortunately, Alice’s plot is just one of many narrative lines in the film, and *The Dream Master* continues the trend of *The Dream Warriors* by introducing a gaggle of stereotyped teens who all possess one interesting quality that can be exploited by Freddy in their nightmares. One girl has asthma, so Freddy chokes her to death with what appears to be an inhaler. Another girl hates bugs, so Freddy turns her into a giant cockroach and then squishes her in a roach motel. Alice’s brother, Rick, likes to perform karate (and does so in a cheesy video montage), and an invisible Freddy kicks his ass with martial arts.

Worst of all is poor Joey (Rodney Eastman), who was lured to his near-doom in the last installment by a sexy supermodel. In *The Dream Master*, he falls for the same trick again, and is drowned by Freddy in his water-bed when trying to make it with a nude chick in the mattress. “How’s this for a wet dream?” Freddy asks him. Poor Joey: fool him once, shame on Freddy; fool him twice, shame on the screenwriters.

If you plan to deride the writers for their lackluster efforts on this fourth Freddy flick, you’d best start with their ridiculous method of resurrecting Freddy. Avid Elm Street fans will recall that the previous installment ended with Krueger’s bones consecrated in an automobile junkyard. The bones were given a Christian burial and the horror was over. In a singularly stupid resurrection, *The Dream Master* returns

Freddy to life after a dog named Jason (wink, nudge) pees on his bones and de-consecrates them. What makes this resurrection baffling is the fact that the de-consecrating appears to occur in Kincaid's dream, not our consensus reality. So a dog pissing on Freddy's bones brings the monster back to life ... does that satisfy you as a plausible explanation? Writer Brian Helgeland and Scott Pierce should be banned from horror films for life for foisting such a development on the audience.

In another misguided subplot, the script attempts to add new layers to the *Nightmare on Elm Street* mythology by revealing that Freddy isn't just a sinful bad father-child molester-dream avenger, he's actually something mythic. According to a high school teacher who lectures about this in the film, every society going back to ancient times includes skilled dreamers who control what they see. There's a positive gate and a negative gate. One dream master is positive and protects people in dreams, and one is evil. Guess which one Freddy is?

"I've been guarding my gate for a long time, bitch," Freddy tells Alice during the finale in a church, indicating that he's the negative dream master, but again, this feels woefully inconsistent with previous installments. His comment is, technically speaking, untrue. Until Jason the mutt pissed on his bones, Freddy was guarding nothing except junked automobiles. He's been dead and buried in hallowed ground for a while before this movie, not guarding a dream gate.

Actually, as is increasingly the case in these rubber reality films, *The Dream Master* has no sense at all of internal logic. Consider that Kristen, here played by Tuesday Knight instead of Patricia Arquette, is the last of the Elm Street children. Apparently, she is the last kid Freddy is "allowed" to torture (as vengeance for the sins of the fathers). But Freddy wants to keep killing, so he forces Kristen to use her power and call in somebody else to the dream, someone else to kill: Alice. Now he has access to all of Alice's friends through her, because she has absorbed Kristen's power (that's her dream ability—the capacity to assimilate all other dream powers, which makes her the Dream Master). Since Alice now has Kristen's power to pull people into dreams, Freddy shouldn't want to vanquish or kill Alice because she's his only gateway to future kills, right? Yet, in the end, he tries pretty hard to kill her.

Whatever, I guess.

Dream Master is also less than satisfying because it invents a new and stupid way to kill Freddy. In keeping with the film's fascination with

ancient mythology, Freddy can be killed (like the Gorgon Medusa) by seeing his own reflection. This is a shock, since Freddy staged a hall of mirrors with multiple reflections of himself in the finale of *Dream Warriors*. Again, it's an idea totally unmotivated by previous installments in the series.

The final insult is that the movie starts and ends with pop songs, like a James Bond film. Horror has left the building, folks. See the movie; laugh at the jokes; buy the soundtrack. Where's the Freddy Happy Meal?

The Dream Master has two things going for it. One is the character of Alice, a meek girl who considers herself an ugly duckling and who, through the course of the film, becomes strong. When the movie begins, she'll stand up to no one—not even her own abusive father. But by the climax, she's taking down the ultimate bad dad, Freddy himself.

Alice's blossoming is coupled with the mirror (an important symbol in the film). When she is weak and diffident, the mirror is loaded with photographs that obscure her reflection. The message is that she doesn't want to see herself; she'd rather hide from what she considers ugly. But as Alice's strength grows, she takes down the photos and countenances her own image. What she finds there is gorgeous and strong. This is the perfect counterpoint to Freddy's storyline. His ugly, disgusting reflection is what kills "evil," (though that's baffling given the film's previous installments), and Alice's reflection is what makes her powerful. That's a nice symbolism to include in the picture.

Again, horror movie critics always want to complain that these movies are somehow misogynist in nature; that they send bad images to young girls. It seems quite the contrary is true. Name another genre in which a greasy-haired ugly duckling can find her inner strength and beauty through self-actualization? From Nancy to Alice, the women on Elm Street are tough, resourceful, powerful role models for teenagers, ones who—*mirror*—reality in their efforts to navigate high school, and indeed life.

Although most of the film, much like its predecessor, feels like a showcase for special effects, the lighting scheme is fascinating and fun. An eagle-eyed viewer will always know when he has entered the domain of Krueger, because green and red (the colors on Freddy's sweater) predominate. An ambulance carrying Dan to the hospital is a strange emerald inside. Later, a green exit sign hangs over a door in a ward. These are subtle signs that Alice has left behind reality and

entered Freddy's realm. It's a nice touch to mark Freddy's world with a distinct color scheme, and the film doesn't hammer the notion home. It's merely an interesting grace note which adds a degree of visual aplomb.

I grew up with the Freddy movies and love them all with a geeky pride, and each for different reasons. They're fun, they're fast-paced, but as the series wore on, they become less and less frightening. And who wants to spend time watching a scary movie that isn't scary?

Phantasm II



Critical Reception

“Don Coscarelli jumps back into the director’s chair and gives us an adrenaline rush of the Tall Man. Like *Evil Dead II*, this film respects its predecessor, but decides to take you on a roller coaster ride instead of trying to scare you. Reggie Bannister is becoming the star of the series slowly but surely (outside of Angus Scrimm, of course), and some of the trippy goings-on from the first film are repeated here. Watch for Kenneth Tigar, a fine character actor perhaps best known for his many appearances on the *Barney Miller* TV show, playing a very intense priest. The real star of this film, though, is the ball. The ball in this film really kicks some serious butt. While it may not be the classic that the first film is, *Phantasm II* in no way disappoints.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

“A 19-year-old kid and a bald, middle-aged ice cream man get armed to the teeth to battle grave robbers from another dimension. This has all the makings of a great horror movie: unforgettable monster (The Tall Man), eerie setting (a mortuary in a ghost town), plenty of dead things and bad dreams ... plus a pair of vigilantes with chainsaws and flame throwers. It doesn’t make any sense, but, like the original *Phantasm*, it makes up for all shortcomings with wild imagination.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Le Gros (Michael Pearson); Reggie Bannister (Reggie); Angus Scrimm (The Tall Man); Paula Irvine (Liz); Kenneth Tigar (Father Meyers); Samantha Phillips (Alchemy); Ruth C. Engel (Grandma); Mark Anthony Major (Mortician); Robin Kushner

(Grandpa); Stacey Travis (Jeri); J. Patrick McNamara (Psychologist); Michael Baldwin (Young Mike).

CREW: A Don Coscarelli Film. *Music:* Fred Myrow with Christopher L. Stone. *Production Designer:* Philip Duffin. *Film Editor:* Peter Teschner. *Director of Photography:* Daryn Okada. *Special Makeup:* Mark Shostrom. *Special Visual Effects:* Dream Quest Images. *Sphere Manufacturer:* Steve Patino. *Special Makeup Effects Constructed by:* Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero, Everett Burrell, Greg Smith, David Barton, Jim McPherson. *Executive Producer:* Don Coscarelli. *Producer:* Roberto A. Quezada. *Written and Directed by:* Don Coscarelli. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Seven years after escaping from the ghoulish and evil Tall Man (Scrimm) and his minions, Michael Pearson (Le Gros) leaves an asylum and re-teams with his buddy Reggie (Bannister) to track down the villain and help a girl, Liz (Irvine), with whom he shares prophetic visions.

When the Tall Man kills Reggie's family with a gas explosion, the duo goes in search of him in the west, heavily armed with improvised weaponry, including a double shotgun and a specially modified flame thrower.

Reggie and Michael follow a trail of ghost towns and cemeteries and then arrive at tiny Perigord, Oregon, where Liz is burying her elderly grandfather and coming face to face with the evil Tall Man and his scheme to enslave the dead and ship them off to his dimension.

Reggie and Michael race to the Tall Man's funeral home when Liz is abducted, but they must face all of his soldiers, including incredibly strong dwarves (actually shrunken humans) gas-mask-donning "Gravers," eerie morticians, and a new array of deadly spheres that fly like guided missiles and seek out prey to latch onto and exsanguinate.

COMMENTARY: Guns, guns, guns. By the second half of the 1980s, horror films—including *Aliens* (1986), *Evil Dead 2* (1987) and *Predator* (1987)—saw their heroes arming themselves to the teeth for combat with monsters both supernatural and extraterrestrial.

Smart guns, Gatling guns, shotguns, flame throwers, grenade launchers, you name it, they were all on-screen. It was a symptom of two trends. One was proliferating sequels (which required more elaborate death scenes and "carnage candy," to quote *Scream 2*). The second trend was the sudden requirement to do up everything bigger

and better. The late 1980s and early 1990s represented the heyday of bigger-is-better thinking, and woe to the horror film that bucked any trends. Just look what happened to *Alien 3* (1992), a film that followed up *Aliens'* all-out warfare with—*gasp*—no guns. Fan boy revolt!

Given the proliferation of guns in the horror cinema of the day, Don Coscarelli's follow-up to his brilliant, surreal 1979 *Phantasm* continues the trend of militarizing horrors. One-half action film, this horror sequel lingers over important details like the biggest chainsaw ever, and suiting-up scenes in graveyards. There's a “shopping” scene in an abandoned hardware store where “tools” are selected for the fight with the Tall Man. *Phantasm II* also focuses on details such as two sawed-off shotguns (strapped together as an uber gun) and the creation of a home-made flame thrower.

Phantasm II is essentially a remake of *Phantasm*, only with guns ... big guns. The Tall Man returns with all his famous minions, including the dwarves and the silver blood-draining spheres (the ball is back!), and the film even concludes in similar fashion, with the good guys finding the strange tuning-fork gateway, almost getting sucked to another planet/dimension, and then destroying the Tall Man's final operation. Finally, the sting-in-the-tail/tale is the same one that finished *Phantasm*: a realizing that the events are not a dream, but real, and that the Tall Man is back. Sure, there are updates and upgrades (remember, bigger was better in the 1980s), and that means there's a Gold Sphere to contend with, one bigger and badder than its predecessor. It boasts a torch, can fly through doors, fire a laser, and even drill. It has a burrowing feature with rotating saw teeth, which really makes it perfect for intra-dimensional incursions.

Were an intrepid viewer to watch *Phantasm* and *Phantasm II* back to back, what would become apparent almost immediately is that each one perfectly represents the Zeitgeist of the decade in which it was produced. As established, the films tell essentially the same story, a battle against the Tall Man in a dying or dead town, but their focus is entirely different. The first *Phantasm* inhabited the half-understood realm of dreams rather than conventional reality. The original's surreal central narrative was both irrational but mesmerizing, the story focusing upon on a boy who could not accept the death of his family, and yet was simultaneously obsessed by death (hence The Tall Man).

The sequel features the same narrative, only with a different, less abstract slant. *Phantasm II* is far more conventional in an action-

packed way (meaning lots of explosions and gore). To wit, the Tall Man briefly goes out in a blaze of glory in this sequel, embalmed with hydrochloric acid for a climactic meltdown sequence. Compare this show-stopping sequence with his demise in the original, and one can see how priorities have changed.

None of this description is meant as a rap against *Phantasm II*, a wholly enjoyable roller coaster of a film. Like the original, Coscarelli's follow-up boasts an odd, off-kilter tone that grants it something special. The film isn't tongue in cheek, rather strangely earnest and solemn. Still, this material is neither as dreamy nor scary as it was the first time around. Instead, all the stunts are handled with skill, the special effects are bloody good, and the pace is fast. Perhaps, given audience tastes in 1988, Coscarelli couldn't make a sequel to *Phantasm* that was as trippy, bizarre and original as the first installment, so he did the next best thing: He re-made his classic with a 1980s sensibility.

Phantasm II is a terrific companion piece to *Phantasm*, and the two films work better together than separately. By itself, *Phantasm II* isn't so exceptional, however. It's actually aged worse than the 1970s film, because that film boasts a unique, singular texture that keeps it fresh and forever young. Since American cinema has long past such 1980s clichés as "the suit-up" scene, as well as action movies like *Rambo* (1985), one can't really say the same for *Phantasm II*. Or to put it another way, *Phantasm*—in some fashion—was ahead of its time and still is. *Phantasm II*, being so representative of the 1980s, now feels behind the times.

LEGACY: Two inferior, direct-to-video sequels followed in the 1990s: *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* (1994) and *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* (1998). Angus Scrimm and Reggie Bannister returned for both sequels, while Michael Baldwin (from *Phantasm*) returned to the role of Michael instead of James Le Gros.

Poltergeist III

★ ½

Critical Reception

"This sequel is unnecessary but not unwatchable—for the first half ... There is good continuity with its predecessors. *Poltergeist III* sinks in the second half. Skerritt and Allen seem to take the demonic forces in

stride, in this way reminiscent of Grade B 50s sci-fi and horror films.”—Kim Holston and Tom Winchester, *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Film Sequels, Series and Remakes*, McFarland and Company, 1997, page 387.

“This one was going back to the well too many times. Thankfully, we haven’t seen a *Poltergeist IV*. Yet.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster and Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tom Skerritt (Bruce Gardner); Nancy Allen (Aunt Trish); Heather O’Rourke (Carol Anne); Lara Flynn Boyle (Donna Gardner); Richard Fire (Dr. Seaton); Kip Wentz (Scott); Nathan Davis (Reverend Kane); Zelda Rubinstein (Tangina); Roger May (Burt); Paul Graham (Martin); Stacy Gilchrist (Melissa); Joey Garfield (Jeff); Chris Murphy (Dusty); Roy Hytower (Nathan); Meg Thalker (Deborah).

CREW: MGM Presents a Gary Sherman Film. *Casting:* Jane Alderman, Shelley Andreas. *Music:* Joe Renzetti. *Executive Producer:* Gary Sherman. *Film Editor:* Ross Albert. *Production Designer:* Paul Eads. *Director of Photography:* Alex Nepomniashchy. *Costume Designer:* Tom McKinley. *Special Visual Effects Designed by:* Gary Sherman. *Special Makeup Design:* John Caglione, Jr., Doug Drexler. *Special Makeup Consultant:* Dick Smith. *Stunt Coordinator:* Ben R. Scott. *Written by:* Gary Sherman, Brian Taggert. *Produced by:* Barry Bernardi. *Directed by:* Gary Sherman. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Carol Anne Freeling (O’Rourke) has moved away from her family to attend a special school for the gifted in Chicago. She lives in a hi-tech high-rise with her mom’s sister, Trish (Allen) and Trish’s husband, Bruce (Skerritt), the building’s designer.

At school, Carol Anne’s psychologist, Dr. Seaton (Fire), believes that Carol Anne causes mass-hypnosis in others, a theory put to the test when the malevolent spirit, Reverend Kane (Davis) returns to claim the girl. This time, the poltergeist and his minions can only appear in reflections, but that doesn’t mean Kane isn’t powerful, as when he manages to pull Carol Anne, Bruce’s daughter Donna (Flynn Boyle) and her beau, Scott (Wentz) into a puddle!

Far away, the medium Tangina (Rubinstein) senses danger and flies to Chicago to do battle with Kane one last time. As before, the love of a family will be the strongest weapon against Kane, but Tangina discovers that Trish has very little love for Carol Anne.

COMMENTARY: *Poltergeist III* is the worst of the *Poltergeist* films, and a weak movie even judged independently from the popular 1980s franchise. Of course, that assessment doesn't mean there aren't elements of the film worthy of admiration. *Poltergeist III* starts off strong in the series' new urban setting, the Windy City, and director Gary Sherman brilliantly stages several spooky sequences involving mirrors (actually huge sets built against their reflection, with the "mirror wall" as the mid-point).

These moments are fascinating, timed-to-perfection and quite inspired in their own right, yet *Poltergeist III* disappoints because, in the tradition of many a bad sequel, it asks audiences to "forget" certain important elements of the earlier pictures. Also, *Poltergeist III* goes badly off track during its conclusion, which results in a rubber-reality free-for-all, and a mousy "sting in the tail/tale" ending. That the film involves screaming, insipid teens, rather than a likable family unit also tends to undercut *Poltergeist III*, though at least the film was trying to accomplish something new.

The central conceit of *Poltergeist III* is a rubber-reality world in which mirrors represent the exit-and-entry point to the supernatural plane. It doesn't sound like the other *Poltergeists*, and it isn't, but sometimes a breath of fresh air can do a franchise good. Inhabiting the doppelganger mirror realm is *Poltergeist 2*'s villain, Reverend Kane, here played by Nathan Davis and made-up to look like a kind of comic-book ghoul with a skeletal face and a wild mane of white hair, rather than the frighteningly real, emaciated Kane of the previous entry. Kane has grown weak since his last defeat by the Freelings, and is now apparently able to inhabit only the mirror, though later in the film, as he gathers strength, he also sucks heat out of the high rise, making it a giant ice box.

Director Sherman has ghoulish good fun staging sequences in which images in the mirror linger longer than they should, like a blank-faced, empty reflection of Skerritt's character. Similar, he stages an effective shot when Kane throws a mug at the mirror, and suddenly a ghoulish hand bursts through a desk, and such. Basically, over and over again, he fools an audience that's been successfully lulled into believing it's watching a reflection. Here reflections come to life, and every surface—even the reflective surface of a puddle in a parking garage—offers the opportunity for a jolt from "the other side." It's weird and inventive and different, and funny to think about how often in life mirrors are taken for granted and ignored. Setting the film in a high-rise in Chicago laden with mirrors is a good attempt to send the series off in a fresh direction.

Yet *Poltergeist III* starts to wear on the nerves because at the same time it is billed as a sequel to two popular films, it hopes to shed the effect of those families. In *Poltergeist* and *Poltergeist II*, a typical suburban family had to band together and fight for life against the supernatural. The wealthy lifestyle was forsaken (as was TV, in *Poltergeist's* memorable conclusion), and each family member had to affirm his love for the others. It was sentimental, true, but also a rather positive statement on family. The Freelings had bonded so deeply that by the end of the second film, they were zooming through the afterlife to save one of their own.

Poltergeist III commences by asking audiences to believe the impossible: that Diane and Steve Freeling have let their pre-adolescent daughter leave their protection, travel cross-country, and move in with an aunt and uncle. Now granted, kids grow up and attend college (like the Freelings' eldest daughter), but then, it was Carol Anne who was the focus of the evil supernatural spirits in both previous films. It was she who was the "prize" of Kane. And she's not a teenager, she's still just a kid. Does anyone actually believe for a minute that these two loving parents would let their daughter move to Chicago to attend a special school and not go with her?

The movie might have avoided this problem in believability had the supernatural attack occurred over a very short span. No time to contact the parents. Or, contrarily, had the film established that the parents were on their way to help. Instead, the movie acknowledges that Tangina—a country away—has time to realize "My God, he found her!" (referring to Kane) and fly to Chicago to rescue Carol Anne. She arrives in time to stop the bad reverend and save the day. What, Tangina couldn't spring for a phone call at the airport before boarding the plane? How about before you left? The movie asks viewers to believe that Tangina has the time and foresight to help Carol Anne, but that her beloved parents are totally M.I.A. and wouldn't come out.

Of course, Jo Beth Williams and Craig T. Nelson weren't going to appear in the sequel, but a clever writer could have navigated this issue of believability and kept family bonds intact in a way *Poltergeist III* does not.

Yet *Poltergeist III* has much deeper problems than a squaring with the previous films. The move introduces the character of Donna and her boyfriend, Scott. About an hour into the film, it stops making any kind of sense and dead animals come to life in a freezer, the freezer floods, water runs sideways, and so on. Even though this is ridiculous, what's worse is that at the end, everybody is restored to life (save Tangina, of

course, who has gone off with Reverend Kane) except for Scott! Apparently, the supernatural didn't grant him a reprieve. The movie has apparently forgotten to grant the character a closing scene to let the audience know if he's alive, dead, or floating out there in the netherworld.

The film's conclusion, which requires Tangina to walk off hand-in-hand with Reverend Kane, also strikes one as rather unbelievable. If all she had to do was lead him to the light, why didn't she do this at the end of *Poltergeist II* and save everybody the trouble of a further supernatural incursion? I thought the earlier movie made clear that Kane wanted to keep Carol Anne with him to prevent others from going into the light. Now he's just happy to walk off into the light without his followers (remember those doomsday cultists in the cave?), with Tangina guiding him?

Poltergeist III ends with a whimper, not a bang. In the weakest of imaginable stingers, the film ends with a shot of the Chicago skyline. Lightning strikes a building and on the soundtrack, Kane laughs.

So did the good reverend not go into the light? Is he now too weak to travel through mirror but can only travel through lightning? What does this ending mean? Was *Poltergeist IV: Power Outage* on the drawing board?

I don't know, maybe the missing Scott will keep the reverend company on the other side...

LEGACY: The *Poltergeist* franchise name was resurrected on Showtime television for a long-lived series about paranormal investigators entitled *Poltergeist: The Legacy* (1996–99).

Heather O'Rourke, the charming young girl who made Carol Anne such a vivid character, and who enlivens *Poltergeist III* with her charm and innocent presence, died of an unusual illness while making the film. *Poltergeist III* was dedicated to her memory.

Prison

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Standard horror flick from this era—let's try to get a franchise going, let's have it take place in a familiar kind of place, let's have somebody

coming back from the past to get revenge ... same old stuff. This is the film that told me that even if the commercials said it was going to be good, that didn't mean anything. All the scares from *Prison* seemed to be in the trailer. *Shocker* is the same film with different makeup. You'd think Irwin Yablans would stop trying to remake *Halloween* already."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lane Smith (Warden Sharpe); Viggo Mortensen (Burke); Chelsea Field (Katherine Walker); Lincoln Kirkpatrick (Cresus); Andre De Shields (Sandor); Ivan Kane (Lasagna); Hal Landon, Jr. (Wallace); Larry Flash Jenkins (Hershey); Tom Everett (Rabbitt); Tom "Tiny" Lister, Jr. (Tiny); Mickey Yablans (Brian Young); Stephen E. Little (Rhino); Arlen Dean Snyder (Horton); Rod Lockman (Kramer); Kane Hodder (Forsythe); George D. Wallace (Joe Reese); Pat Noonan (Collins).

CREW: Empire Pictures in association with Eden Ltd. presents an Irwin Yablans Production. *Casting Director:* Anthony Barnao. *Casting Associate:* Estelle Rodkoff. *Production Designer:* Philip Duffin. *Music:* Richard Band, Christopher L. Stone. *Conducted by:* Richard Band. *Film Editor:* Andy Horvitch. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Frank Hildebrand. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Story by:* Irwin Yablans. *Screenplay by:* C. Courtney Joyner. *Produced by:* Irwin Yablans. *Directed by:* Renny Harlin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When Creedmore Prison re-opens for the first time in thirty years, the draconian new warden, Sharpe (Smith) experiences recurring nightmares about his time there as a guard, and—in particular—the electric chair execution of a prisoner named Forsythe.

An inmate named Burke (Mortenson), a dead ringer for Forsythe, pick-axes through a stone wall and stumbles upon an old execution chamber, releasing a vengeful supernatural form. Soon, inmates and guards alike are dying in gruesome fashion. Burke's cellmate, Cresus (Kirkpatrick) knows more about Sharpe and Forsythe than he is letting on.

The spirit of Forsythe—which now controls electricity—sets out to destroy those who betrayed him years earlier. With the help of a prison official, Katherine Walker (Field), Burke sets out to escape with Cresus and Warden Sharpe. But on the night the prison is being

destroyed by Forsythe, the wrathful spirit appears in the flesh— still-bound to an electric chair—to wreak his final vengeance.

COMMENTARY: It's always revealing to watch Hollywood jump on a band wagon. Oh sure, producers call it "spontaneous creation," but if one movie is popular, before long a raft of imitators follows. For instance, 1989 was the year of the underwater movie with *The Abyss*, *Deep Star Six*, *Leviathan* and *Lords of the Deep*. Similarly the low-budget horror effort, *Prison*, directed by up-and-comer Renny Harlin, set off another little boom of knock-off horror films in which electricity is the medium of evil. *The Horror Show* and Wes Craven's *Shocker* both utilized the same gimmick in 1989, to much the same effect as this okay movie.

A prison is a terrific location for a horror movie because it provides a wide victim pool (including guards, inmates and warden), a history (a crime in the past) and plenty of opportunities for action, as an early "bus on the loose" set piece demonstrates. The film also gains mileage out of a block riot, a body search (yikes!), the electric chair and other prison film clichés.

Since Renny Harlin directs with flair, the movie is pleasant enough to watch, even if the story is no great shakes. Indeed, it seems recycled from other rubber reality films, as it involves a dead man hoping to gain revenge on those who wronged him. The only wrinkle is the electricity angle (which replaces the dream angle of *Nightmare on Elm Street*): Laser-like bolts fly all through the prison, killing guards and others in a blaze of glory. The stunt work is impressive too.

To its credit, *Prison* isn't jokey or camp, its kills are inventive, and its cast (including a young and dewy Viggo Mortenson) is generally capable. The late, great character actor Lane Smith plays the evil warden with a crime in the past, and as usual, he's very good. An interesting setting grants the film a sense of identity separate from the pack.

Pumpkinhead



Critical Reception

"A pleasant surprise is the characterizations, which are well-developed for this genre ... Even the teenagers, usually little more than cardboard monster horror fodder in horror movies, have shades of

performance..."—Louis B. Parks, "Pumpkinhead brings new life to Spook Shows," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 14, 1988, page 8.

"...derivative, revolting film ... The most repugnant thing about the film is the way director Stan Winston shamelessly milks the audience's emotions ... Henriksen and Hurley turn in truly winning performances in the beginning of the film..."—Lynn Voedisch, "Pumpkinhead shouldn't have sprouted," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 28, 1988, page 51.

"[I]t does have heart. If you like your monster movies with a touch of sweetness, *Pumpkinhead* may be just your cauldron of blood ... Henriksen has some affecting moments as the bereaved father."—Philip Wuntch, "If You Dig Homespun Horror, Check Out *Pumpkinhead*," *The Daily Morning News*, October 14, 1988, page 2C.

"A cool creature, an acceptable back story, and Lance Henriksen give you a satisfying film that seemed like a breath of fresh air on its release. Stan Winston does it again."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Ed Harley); Jeff East (Chris); John DiAquino (Joel); Kimberly Ross (Kim); Joel Hoffman (Steve); Cynthia Bain (Tracy); Kerry Remssen (Maggie); George Buck Flower (Wallace); Billy Hurley (Matthew Harley); Lee De Broux (Tom Harley); Peggy Walton Walker (Ellie Harley); Richard Warlock (Clayton Harley); Devon Odessa (Hessie); Joseph Piro (Jimmy Joe); Mayim Bialik, Jandi Swanson (Wallace Kids); Greg Michaels (Hill Man); Robert Frederickson (Ethan); Tom Woodruff Jr. (*Pumpkinhead*).

CREW: MGM/UA Communications Company Present a Lion films Production in association with Billy Blake, a Stan Winston film. *Casting:* Bob Morones. *Score:* Richard Stone. *Film Editor:* Marcus Manton. *Production Designer:* Cynthia Kay Charette. *Creature Effects Designed and Created by:* Alec Gillis, Richard Landon, Shane Patrick Mahan, John Rosengrant, Tom Woodruff, Jr. *Unit Production Manager:* Gordon Wolf. *First Assistant Director:* Anderson G. House. *Second Assistant Director:* Christine Larson. *Director of Photography:* Bajan Bazelli. *Executive Producer:* Alex De Benedetti. *Story:* Mark Patrick Carducci, Stan Winston, Richard C. Weinman. *Stunt Coordinator:* Richard Warlock. *Directed by:* Stan Winston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

INCANTATION: "For each of man's evils, a demon exists. You're

looking at vengeance. Cruel, devious ... vengeance.”—Haggis the witch introduces Ed Harley (Lance Henriksen) to a demon in Stan Winston’s underrated *Pumpkinhead*.

SYNOPSIS: When Ed Harley (Henriksen) was a boy in 1957, he caught a glimpse of a monster called Pumpkinhead, a local legend that could be summoned up in the name of vengeance. In the present, Harley has good cause to recall the beast when an irresponsible dirt biker named Joel (DiAquino) and his city friends carelessly kill Harley’s son, Billy (Hurley) in a riding accident.

Harley visits an old witch, Haggis (Schauffler) for help, but she can’t raise the dead ... only give his wrath manifest form. Haggis instructs him to travel to the old graveyard in the pumpkin patch and dig up the corpse of a thing there she can “use” to house a vengeance demon.

Harley does as he is instructed, and before long, a horrible, unstoppable monster some nine feet tall begins to tear apart Joel’s colleagues and friends, and even Joel himself, during a night of bloody murder. Only too late—and once in symbiosis with the hellspawn—does Ed realize that he has committed a great wrong. Ed helps the last two surviving city kids, Chris (East) and Tracy (Bain) but realizes that *Pumpkinhead* cannot be stopped once summoned. Unless Ed pays the ultimate price.

COMMENTARY: A Grimm Fairy Tale perhaps, or merely a good old-fashioned evocation of backwoods American folklore, Stan Winston’s *Pumpkinhead* is a splendid cautionary horror that warns against the intemperance of blood lust. Eye-for-an-eye justice, *Pumpkinhead* moralizes in its ghoulish way, always boomerangs and makes monsters out of even the best of men.

Lance Henriksen, as kindly Ed Harley, is not immune to this swell of hatred. *Pumpkinhead*’s early scenes depict this gentle, quiet man living in peace with his son far from the hustle and flow of contemporary America. There are sweet, beautifully shot scenes, including one at a kitchen table, between Ed and little Billy, but the film doesn’t overdose on the maudlin aspects of the tale. *Pumpkinhead* merely depicts an unassuming, humble existence far from the city, and one that is shattered by the sudden incursion of loud-mouthed teens.

Often in 1980s horror films, teenagers represent the “victim pool” for a runaway slasher or psycho. The teens are victims here too. But the film walks a delicate balance in depicting this group. Some are careless and rude ... but do they actually deserve to die? The unspoken

aesthetic of many a *Friday the 13th* film (being an asshole, a doper, a loud-mouth is a capital punishment offense) is actually being overturned here.

Actually, *Pumpkinhead* is a meditation on vengeance, or vigilante justice, and those occasions it is justified. Little Billy is killed in a mountain biking incident. But Joel, who strikes him with his bike, is guilty—truly—only of recklessness and negligence. That, and being an arrogant asshole. Do his actions merit death? And if so, then who else is also guilty? Are the other teens guilty by association, since they are friends with Joel, the “murderer”? *Pumpkinhead* the demon, once raised to kill, shows no distinction between any of them.

That’s where Ed Harley’s sense of morality finally kicks in. In making a pact with the Devil, he’s become evil, more so than Joel. Consider: Joel accidentally killed a child. Ed has unleashed an unstoppable evil, and in the process poisoned his soul. How does that action serve his dead son? What would Billy think of his father now? These are the questions *Pumpkinhead* contemplates, and it’s both surprising and rewarding to see a mainstream horror film—in the decade of *Death Wish* sequels, Rambo, Chuck Norris movies, Dirty Harry and the like—advocate a stance against vigilantes and eye-for-an-eye “justice.” It sees no reward, no benefit, no glory in bloodlust. What it sees is something detrimental and even sad.

And yet, the movie also clearly has sympathy for Ed Harley. Like *Pet Sematary* (1989), *Pumpkinhead* considers the utter unacceptability and finality of death, especially in terms of a parent’s mourning. The equation here is clear. As human beings, death is the one force we can’t conquer. But, we can hurt each other over it. That, suggests *Pumpkinhead*, is a poor substitute and unwise course.

Unremittingly grim, and credibly unencumbered by anything approaching humor (which also differentiates it from many late ’80s films), *Pumpkinhead* is a beautifully crafted horror. The film is awash in a deep slate-gray-blue color scheme, heavy on both on oppressive atmosphere and atmospherics, including fog and mist, and buoyed by some impressive and expressive sets. The old cemetery represents a memorable look at Backwoods Gothic. Atop a dead mound of dirt (a grave), a creepy pumpkin patch exists, and the camera retracts to reveal a Stygian nightmare of dead, gnarled trees and parched, ruined Earth. Revenge has turned the land decrepit and lifeless.

After visiting a witch as old as the hills, a terrifying old crone who croaks and wheezes her dialogue, Ed Harley commits to a course of

action—revenge—that dooms him. His blood is a component of the mix that brings the demon to life, and herewith every time Pumpkinhead kills, Ed feels it. A little piece of him gets ripped up when his vengeance is executed. He isn't spared the gory details either: Ed sees what Pumpkinhead sees, and the didactic, moral message is simple: Harley wanted revenge, but didn't know how messy and monstrous it could become. Now, too late, he understands his sin. I've always insisted (sometimes to deafening silence) that horror is actually the most moral of genres, and *Pumpkinhead* could probably serve as Exhibit A in that debate. It argues against violence, against revenge. But in a society that pursues "shock and awe" pre-emptive war and relies on blanket black-and-white statements like "you're either with us or you're against us," it's point of view hasn't much traction. Two wrongs, quite simply, don't make a right, and in its simple, backwoods way, *Pumpkinhead* makes that plain.

Pumpkinhead is also downright scary. The indestructible, titular monster is an amazing special effects creation that seems ripped from the human subconscious. It is huge and hulking, filling the doorframe of a cabin easily. The beast even seems to boast different facial expressions throughout, which grants it an unusual personality. Immune to Christian symbolism (including a holy place in the woods and a crucifix), it's a most memorable monster, and reveals how good special effects can bring a fascinating idea to life. Contrast this with *Rawhead Rex*, a film scuttled by a weak monster suit.

Director Stan Winston imbues *Pumpkinhead* with a kind of ethereal, timeless aura. Although the big hair of some of the teens clearly evokes the 1980s, the rest of the film exists outside of any particular decade, making it a cautionary fairy tale for the ages.

LEGACY: *Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings*, a weak sequel directed by Jeff Burr, followed in 1994. It starred Ami Dolenz, Andrew Robinson, and President Clinton's brother Roger as "Mayor Bubba."

The Serpent and the Rainbow

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"Wes Craven's forays into mainstream films have been ... well ... not entirely successful. This film has some decidedly creepy moments, and it all works as a film, but accepting it all as based on fact is

problematic. Still, this is one of Craven's more polished-looking films, and there are little glimpses of Craven's typical style here and there, but it's kind of bland."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bill Pullman (Dr. Dennis Alan); Cathy Tyson (Marielle DuChamps); Zakes Mokae (Capt. Peytraud); Paul Winfield (Lucien Celine); Brent Jennings (Louis Mozart); Conrad Roberts (Christophe); Badja Djola (Gaston); Theresa Merritt (Simone); Michael Gough (Schoonbacher); Paul Guilfoyle (Andrew Cassidy); Dey Young (Mrs. Cassidy); Aleta Mitchell (Celestine); William Newman (French Missionary Doctor); Jaime Pina Gautier (Julio); Francis Guinan (American Doctor); Sally-Ann Munn (Nurse); Jackson Delgado (Possessed Dancer); Claudia Pimental (Old Crone) Luis Tavara Pesqiera (Kyle Cassidy).

CREW: A Universal Pictures Release. Keith Barish presents A Rob Cohen/David Ladd Production, a film by Wes Craven. *Casting:* Dianne Crittendon. *Costume Designer:* Peter Mitchell. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Film Editor:* Glen Farr. *Production Design:* David Nichols. *Director of Photography:* John Lindley. *Executive Producers:* Rob Cohen, Keith Barish. *Inspired by the book by:* Wade Davis. *Screenplay by:* Richard Maxwell, A.R. Simoun. *Producers:* David Ladd, Doug Claybourne. *Stunt Coordinator:* Tony Cecere. *Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: "There's a door to the mystical, and you just walked through it."—A warning to Dr. Dennis Alan (Bill Pullman) in *The Serpent and The Rainbow*.

SYNOPSIS: In 1985, after returning from a harrowing experience in the Rio Negro area of the Amazon basin, Dr. Dennis Alan (Pullman) is asked by Earl Schoonbacher (Gough), a friend and a consultant for Boston Bio Corp, to investigate claims that a Haitian man reported dead in 1978, Christophe (Roberts), is alive at a clinic in Port au Prince. Is it conceivable that Christophe is a zombie, or—perhaps more to the point—that the witch doctors of the land gave him a remarkable drug undiscovered by Western science, a powerful anesthetic that could revolutionize modern medicine?

Once in Haiti, Alan meets with Dr. DuChamps (Tyson) at the People's Clinic. She befriends him and introduces him to a local magician named Lucien Celine (Winfield). Unfortunately, Alan also meets a

local strongman, Peytraud (Mokae), who controls the brutal police force, called the Ton-Ton Macoute. Peytraud is rumored to be a zombie master, and he doesn't like Alan snooping around. As Alan learns quickly, voodoo is practiced in this part of Haiti, and more powerful than he ever could have imagined.

After much difficulty, Alan and a local medicine man, Mozart (Jennings) team up and produce the strange "zombie powder" that so interests the American corporation. Alan discovers that anyone subjected to it becomes physically paralyzed, yet remains conscious all the while. The powder wears off in twelve hours, but by that time, many of Peytraud's enemies are already buried beneath the earth, hence the "zombie" myth of men crawling out of their graves in a seeming stupor. Alan learns this first-hand when one of Peytraud's assassins contaminates him with the powder and he is buried alive.

Alan is eventually rescued, but he realizes that for his soul to be free, he must battle Peytraud to the death, harnessing his spirit guide and the voodoo religion. The final battle against evil, with Alan and DuChamps' lives on the line, is fought against the backdrop of a Haiti erupting in political turmoil.

COMMENTARY: Wade Davis's non-fiction book *The Serpent and The Rainbow* was published in 1985. At 297 pages, it served not only as a travelogue and history of Haiti, but as a startling exploration of the "boundaries of death." As such, it was a perfect fit for Hollywood producers, and little time was wasted bringing the book to film. Director Wes Craven and writers Richard Maxwell and A.R. Simoun remained substantively true to the spirit of Davis's work, though the film has been tarted up with horror elements, including Craven's favorite template: rubber reality.

In print, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* commences with a note on orthography and a history of the word "voodoo," including its roots in the Fon Language of Dohemy and Togo. This note also comments on how voodoo (or, rather, "vodoun" as Davis terms it) refers not to the typical Hollywood vision of fantasy, sorcery and black magic, but to a specific event: a dance in which spirits arrive in our world to mount and then possess the living.

The opening note also discusses the spelling of the word "zombie" and what it means to Haitians, particularly the spirit of a dead man. The tenor of the book is established quickly as one of respect and understanding for customs quite different from Western tradition. Though different in some graphic details, Craven's film adaptation

attempts fidelity because it seeks to understand voodoo rather than merely exploit it as a Hollywood construct representing mysticism and the occult. Craven's picture even carries over the travelogue aspects of Davis's text.

The structure of the film's script is faithful to the book. In the first chapter of the text, entitled "The Jaguar," Davis recounts a 1974 visit to the Amazon jungle. Once there, he journeys with an English journalist across two hundred fifty miles of rain forest separating Colombia from Panama. During the trip, a black jaguar appeared before a lost Davis and pointed him safely towards home. In the film, this scene is translated, and utilized to establish the threat of a dangerous magic man named Peytraud ... a character (and villain) who does not grace the book. Still, Alan escapes from the jungle when his spirit guide jaguar leads him to a road.

In Chapter 2, "The Frontier of Death," the Wade Davis of the book meets with his old professor, Dr. Schultes (Dr. Schoonbacher in the movie) and a psychiatrist and pioneer in psychopharmacology named Dr. Kline (Dr. Cassidy in the movie). They present Davis with a tempting offer and show him the death certificate of Clarvius Narcissus (Christophe in the film), a man who died in 1962, but who was recently seen alive in Central Haiti. He is the victim of a voodoo cult—a zombie risen from the grave. Craven's movie remains especially faithful in this section, capturing the mood and even using much of the dialogue from this chapter in the book. Interestingly, the movie leaves out one detail. In the printed version, the zombie powder is valuable as an anesthetic, but within a different context. The scientists believe that it could be utilized to keep American astronauts sedated during long interplanetary trips.

From there, the film continues to mirror its source material. Although details such as those found in Chapter 3 ("The Calabar Hypothesis") are omitted, most of the characters in the film do eventually show up. Maximillian Beauvoir, Lucien in Craven's version, is a club owner and vodoun expert. Erachel Beauvoir is his daughter, but in the film, this relationship has been removed and Marielle DuChamps is the renamed character. The Haitian chemist who produces the zombie powder (also known as tetrodotoxin) is Marcel Pierre in the book, Mozart in the film. Although the sequences in which the American ethnobiologist negotiates for the powder are translated from the book, the character is quite different from text to film. In the book, Marcel is part of the Ton-Ton Macoute, the film's antagonists.

Where the two versions of this story differ most significantly is in the

character Peytraud. There is no powerful villain in Davis' book. Instead, Davis encounters strange secret societies which use the zombie powder as a punishment against those who have broken unspoken laws. Fans of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* will recognize Peytraud as a kindred spirit to Freddy, one who thrives on the enslaved souls of his enemies (as Freddy stays strong by harnessing the souls of his children), and who—in a pinch—can re-shape reality to his evil template.

The Serpent and the Rainbow's denouement unfolds not in consensus reality, but in the dream landscape of the mind. Because Peytraud is a magician extraordinaire, he is able to—like Freddy, again—haunt Alan's dreams with a terrifying regularity. From the prologue in the Amazon basin to the climax, Peytraud is a ubiquitous presence, and he thus provides the film a sense of cohesion (and drama) that the book lacked. The final confrontation between Peytraud and Alan is accordingly a descent into a twisted reality governed by the evil man. Alan must pass through a prison where grotesque, bony arms grope blindly for him. To enter Peytraud's den of evil, he must descend a strange staircase resembling one of M. Escher's paintings.

If this is disappointing in any regard it is only because Peytraud, adorning a red shirt, eventually transforms into a horribly burned specter from the other side who strangely resembles the red-and-green-garbed Freddy Krueger. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a template Craven would return to one more time in the 1980s, in the film *Shocker* (1989).

The best and most effective scene in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* doesn't even involve dream imagery. Instead, it depicts Alan's paralysis and time being buried alive. The scene commences cogently when a figure from a crowd unexpectedly darts forward and blows the poisonous powder into Alan's face. In a previous scene, Boston scientists clinically established the effects of the poison, so the audience is aware that the victim appears dead but is conscious. Thus, Craven makes the audience share Alan's panic as he begs for help from locals who do not understand what he's saying.

As Alan collapses, Craven switches to Alan's point of view, thus putting the viewer into his head. The director sticks with this subjective perspective as doctors pronounce Alan dead. Then, we view Alan being lowered into a coffin and the lid being hammered, again from the first-person subjective view.

After the audience sees dirt tossed onto the coffin (and spraying Alan's

face), there is only darkness in the frame. The screen goes totally black and when the poison wears off, our protagonist awakens in darkness and pounds to escape. Still, the audience can see nothing but impenetrable blackness. Alan's breathing turns labored and then he feels a spider crawling over his skin. This is a spine-tingling sequence so terrifying that one genre reviewer accused Craven of "directorial sadism" for his decision to bury his audience alive with the film's hero. Sadistic or not, it is a terribly effective sequence, and shows off Craven at his stylish best.

The Serpent and the Rainbow boasts brilliant and beautiful location footage in Haiti, making it feel like a horror epic. The performances are universally strong, and for much of the film, Craven is able to retain the documentary feel of the book. The sudden change to rubber reality may feel jarring to some, but it actually works in context with the film's screenplay, which from the jaguar-spirit guide prologue right through the climax has established the power of voodoo. Zakes Mokae is the next iteration of Freddy Krueger and the latest word in "rubber reality" villains, but one wishes that this fine actor (who reeks menace) could have somehow escaped Krueger's shadow. Perhaps in a decade dominated by that dream demon, such an escape wasn't possible, but the moments in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* that derive from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* are also the moments which tend to undercut what a fine, impressive movie this is.

The Seventh Sign

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Shultz never gives it less than his full conviction and skill. *The Seventh Sign* is a beautifully lit, framed and edited film, too classy to be laughed at, but too silly to be good for much else."—Dave Kehr, "*Seventh Sign* Scores High on Technique, Low on Message," *The Chicago Tribune*, April 1, 1988, page 36.

"Australian director Carl Shultz ... demonstrates striking agility and a remarkable facility for mounting ominous events of epic proportions within tight budgetary constraints ... *The Seventh Sign* screenplay ... is uncommonly well-paced and full of sharply drawn, richly textured characters..."—Jim Kozak, *Magill's Cinema Annual 1989: A Survey of the Films of 1988*, Salem Press, 1989, page 289.

"Let's remake *The Omen*. No, that costs money. Let's change it around so we don't have to pay them. Okay. Let's not even base it on anything that's even in the typical religions. Okay, even better. We signed Michael Biehn. Uh, oh, he usually makes good films. Don't worry, we got Demi Moore. Whew. For a second there, you had me scared."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Demi Moore (Abby Quinn); Michael Biehn (Russell Quinn); Jurgen Prochnow (David Bannon); Peter Friedman (Father Lucchi); Manny Jacobs (Avi); John Heard (Catholic Priest); John Taylor (Jimmy Szaragos); Akosua Busia (Penny); Ian Buchanan (Meteorologist); Leonardo Cimino (Head Cardinal); Lee Garlington (Dr. Margaret Innes); Michael Laskin (Israeli Colonel); Hugo Stanger (Old Priest); Patricia Allison (Administrator); John Walcutt (Novitiate); Arnold Johnson (Janitor).

CREW: Tri-Star Presents an Interscope Communications Production. *Casting:* Pennie Du Pont. *Music:* Jack Nitzsche. *Film Editor:* Caroline Biggerstaff. *Director of Photography:* Juan Ruiz Anchia. *Executive Producer:* Paul R. Gurian. *Produced by:* Ted Field, Robert W. Cort. *Co-Producer:* Kathleen Hallberg. *Costume Designer:* Durinda Rice Wood. *Production Designer:* Stephen Marsh. *Makeup Effects:* Craig Reardon. *Special Visual Effects:* Dream Quest Images. *Written by:* W.W. Wicket, George Kaplan. *Directed by:* Carl Shultz. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Around the world, phenomena occur. In Haiti, fish wash up on the shores dead. In Israel, a terrorist town—formerly the site of Sodom—is destroyed in an ice storm. But in America life continues seemingly as normal, especially for Abby Quinn (Demi Moore), a pregnant suburbanite who has miscarried before and who attempted suicide because of it. Her baby is due February 29 (it's leap year). Her attorney husband, Russell (Biehn), is busy with the appeals case of a death row convict named Jimmy, a developmentally impaired man who killed his parents because they were brother and sister. In God's law, Jimmy insists, they were sinners and had to be killed.

A mysterious stranger named David Bannon (Prochnow) arrives in town and rents Abby and Russell's garage apartment. He warns Abby that Judgment Day is coming, and that her baby will be born without a soul unless God gives the Earth a second chance and re-stocks the Guf, the Hall of Souls in Heaven.

Abby comes to believe that her child's birth will herald the end of the world—the End Times—and with the help of a young Jewish scholar, Avi (Jacobs), sets about unraveling the mysteries of Revelations and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Unfortunately, they will both have to deal with the shadowy Father Lucchi (Friedman)—a man of the cloth who seems determined to see disaster befall mankind, for very personal reasons. At the same time, Abby begins to experience nightmares from a previous life, envisioning herself as a servant girl in Rome, watching Jesus Christ—David Bannon!—beaten by a thuggish Roman guard. Avi and Abby determine that they must stop the next of the seventh signs heralding the world's doom, and realize that this involves Jimmy, and the death of a man who has killed for “God's word.” Humanity, life on Earth, and the soul of Abby's unborn baby rests on her next move, and whether she has enough hope—and faith—to sustain the world.

COMMENTARY: The 1980s were a strange and dread-filled time for many Americans who were paying attention. Nuclear arms—as well as movies about nuclear apocalypse or the end of the world—proliferated. Prominent government officials, including James Watt and the president himself suggested that the End Times might be upon us. Reagan was quoted in People Magazine in December 1983 saying “Not until now has there been a time in which so many prophecies are coming together. There have been times in the past when people thought the end of the world was coming, and so forth, but never anything like this.”

Considering this widely expressed notion from trusted public officials, perhaps it is no surprise that the horror film responded forcefully to the idea. As has been demonstrated, the genre tracks the Zeitgeist of a given time and responds subtly with reflections, echoes and variations on a prevailing fear.

Thus the 1980s offered such movies as *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (about Judgment Day) in 1981, *Dreamscape* (1984), in which an avuncular American president suffered nuclear nightmares, and survival stories such as 1984's *Night of the Comet*, which gazed at the end of the human race and a “new” beginning. Director Carl Shultz's hit *The Seventh Sign*, starring up-and-coming brat packer Demi Moore, furthered the trend.

The Seventh Sign, a movie which topped the box office for several weeks upon its release, posited the idea, already expressed by Reagan, Watts and others that the apocalypse is nigh. As the movie opens, fish

burn in a Haitian sea as one of the Biblical “seals” is broken. In a desert in Israel, snow inexplicably falls. Or to put it more portentously, (as the movie does): The Prophecies of the End of the World Have Begun!

Interestingly, however, despite special effects spectacles like these, as well as an inconvenient hail storm, the movie focuses primarily on an intimate, personal story, that of a woman named Abby who has lost faith in a world that has spiraled out of control. Scarily, she faces the prospect that “God’s grace is empty” and that her baby will be the first one born without a soul.

To remind us just how bad the world is in the 1980s, and how disappointed Jesus Christ would surely be should he return, *The Seventh Sign* features much TV news footage of war in the Middle East, in Central America and so forth. The effect of all this news footage at once is indeed a reckoning that perhaps mankind hasn’t evolved over the years, but merely slipped into a technological barbarism. And in the final analysis, this is why *The Seventh Sign* is timely and interesting. What would God’s only son think of the wars fought in his name, here on Earth? Of the prisoners tortured and executed? What would he think of the self-righteous who praise him in word, but in deed focus only on accumulating wealth? What would he think about the obscenely rich mega-churches dotting the landscape of America? Would 1980s Christians even recognize Jesus, if he walked into a church? Would he be welcome?

Cleverly, *The Seventh Sign* understands the adage that evil and terror flourish when good people do nothing, and so this is the personal story of Abby, who believes she is powerless to make the world a better place. If she can’t be moved to act—ultimately, to sacrifice—mankind really is doomed. The movie focuses on the importance of one person’s selfless act, and that’s smart, because that’s how social and religious movements began. Indeed, that’s how Christ began to spread his message, and how the religion we call Christianity began thousands of years ago. A change in the world begins not with the masses, but with a brave leader.

Following its apocalyptic climax, Christ turns to the young Jewish scholar who has witnessed Abby’s journey and tells him to write it all down, suggesting, in some fashion, anyway, that a new chapter of Scripture shall become accepted, and that Abby’s story will become the next book of the Bible. It’s a pretty daring movie that suggests its plot be included in amongst the Holy Words, but it’s also the logical conclusion of the film’s speculations. If the Rapture occurred (or

started to occur) today as happens in the film, it would surely merit a chapter or two in the next edition of the Bible, right?

The religious horror film boasts its own set of rules, and Christian horror, even more so. So it's easy for someone to complain that the message of *The Seventh Sign* is on some level reprehensible. Jimmy, the Word of God Killer murders his parents because they sin, and God apparently approves of this brutal act since it is done in His name and He has placed a taboo on incestuous couplings. Jimmy's death—the death of the last martyr—is the seventh sign, after all, in the film. This is roughly like saying that Eric Rudolph was right to bomb abortion clinics and the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 to make his personal political statements, and that God would tacitly approve of his set of values. That's a really terrible message to send out to the masses, that we personally know God's will and should be exonerated legally because we have magically divined it.

After all, Abby could not have performed her final, selfless act without a whole series of events. If Jimmy's parents had not "sinned," he would not have committed murder, the state would not have slated him for execution, and the last martyr would not die. Thus the seventh sign wouldn't have happened. So maybe the sin was part of God's will, no?

See how twisted this can all get when we mere mortals think we've got God's ear?

Anyway, *The Seventh Sign* is overall a very fine film of distinctly Christian stripe, packed with ominous signs and portents and following through a clever narrative to its logical conclusion. Demi Moore is vaguely insipid in the lead role, and the movie raise some interesting questions of validity it never answers, such as why does Jesus—returned to Earth—require a short wave radio to keep abreast of things?

Despite absurdities like that, *The Seventh Sign* glides fluidly on its own power and is emotionally touching, because—all religious affiliation aside, now—it suggests that we warring, corrupt, confused creatures still have the power to make existence on Earth better.

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers



CAST: Pamela Springsteen (Angela); Renee Estevez (Molly); Susan Marie Snyder (Mare); Valerie Hartman (Ally); Tony Higgins (Shawn); Brian Patrick Clark (T.C.); Walter Gotell (Uncle John); Terry Hobbs (Robb); Kendall Bean (Demi); Julie Murphy (Leo); Carol Chamber (Brooke); Amy Fields (Jody); Benji Wilhoite (Anthony); Jason Erlich (Emilio).

CREW: Jerry Silva presents a Double Helix Production of a Michael A. Simpson Film. *Executive Producer:* Stan Wakefield. *Executive in charge of production:* Michael Hitchcock. *Casting:* Shay Griffin. *Special Makeup Effects:* Bill Johnson. *Film Editor:* John David Allen. *Music:* James Oliverio. *Director of Photography:* Bill Mills. *Written by:* Fritz Gordon. *Based on an original idea by:* Robert Hiltzik. *Associate Producer:* Bob Phillips. *Produced by:* Jerry Silva, Michael A. Simpson. *Directed by:* Michael A. Simpson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 79 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The psychotic Angela (Springsteen), now officially a female after a sex change operation, has found work as an uptight camp counselor at Camp Rolling Hills. Angela burns two girls who smoke weed, cuts out the throat of Phoebe, a gossip, and (dressed as Leatherface) chainsaws to death two campers disguised as Freddy and Jason.

COMMENTARY: Pssst! Here's a *great* idea about how to make a lot of money without having any real talent. First, find a horror franchise with a modestly successful first entry (like, say, *Sleepaway Camp*, since it has some name recognition on the shelves of the local Blockbuster), then engage in a little bit of stunt-casting (like putting Bruce Springsteen's sister in the lead role!).

Next, shoot a derivative slasher-style horror movie set at a summer camp (say, like all those *Friday the 13th* thingies), and throw in some gore and self-reflexive touches to please fans of those other franchises. Finally, cast several nubile young women who are willing to show their breasts on camera. Thirteen-year-old boys love "the tit patrol," as this movie so poetically says it.

Now, mix all these elements together. What do you have? *Voila!* Instant horror movie. And here's the thing: You can shoot it all for virtually nothing using a cheap video camera. And the great part about this is that you don't have to know *anything* about filmmaking. Forget about narrative, *mise-en-scene*, pacing or even building suspense. Just put the breasts, er, the actors in front of the camera lens and shoot away.

And instead of trying to generate authentic scares, just have your killer make some funny jokes after each murder, the same way Freddy does. For instance, when two girls are caught smoking weed, the killer should burn them alive and then quip, “Just say no to drugs.” See how easy that is?

If you do all these things—and come up with the shortest movie you can (try for 75 minutes)—you will make a profit. *Guaranteed*. It’s just business, baby. Release your film directly to home video, and you’re certain to make a killing. Maybe even get a sequel or two out of the deal?

Does this review read as cynical? If so, that’s because *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* exists purely and simply to separate teenage boys from their money. The whole movie was conceived and executed in an act of craven cynicism and there’s nothing artistic or socially valuable about the picture. There’s room for all kinds of horror films in this world—cerebral horror, slashers, supernatural horror, even funny terrors—but there’s just no way to defend crap like this movie. Lest someone judge me a puritan or something, let me add: I don’t object to what’s in this movie. I like sex and gore as much as the next guy. I just hate the fact that this movie looks and sounds like garbage. The movie is witless, charmless, artless, but not harmless.

Why not harmless? Because that’s Walter Gotell, the distinguished gentleman who played Soviet General Gogol in a series of James Bond movies, slumming it up as Uncle John! This is a guy who, a scant year earlier, was in *The Living Daylight* (1987). *Unhappy Campers* doesn’t just suck, it’s an embarrassment to a fine actor. Let’s hope he fired his agent.

The original *Sleepaway Camp* adopted the slasher film paradigm and gave it some fascinating twists, ones that dealt with sexuality and the like. *Sleepaway Camp II* can’t be bothered to work that hard. It’s just a waste of time.

Good night, campers.

Spellbinder

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Timothy Daly (Jeff Mills); Kelly Preston (Miranda Reed); Audra

Lindley (Mrs. White); Rick Rossovich (Derek Clayton); Anthony Crivello (Aldys); Diana Bellamy (Grace Woods); Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa (Lt. Lee); James Louis Watkins (Tim Weatherly); Kyle Heffner (Herbie); M.C. Gainey (Brock); Sally Kemp (Marilyn De Witt); Stefan Gierasch (Edgar De Witt); Bob McCracken (Simmons); Karen Baldwin (Mona).

CREW: An MGM/Indian Neck Entertainment Presentation, a Wizan Film Properties Inc. Production. *Casting:* Ellen Meyer, Sally Stiner. *Music:* Basil Poledouris. *Film Editor:* Steve Mirkovich. *Production Design:* Rodger Maus. *Director of Photography:* Adam Greenberg. *Associate Producers:* Bob Doudell, Tracy Torme. *Executive Producers:* Howard Baldwin, Richard Cohen. *Produced by:* Joe Wizan, Brian Russell. *Written by:* Tracy Torme. *Directed by:* Janet Greek. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Yuppie lawyer Jeff (Daly) rescues Miranda (Preston) after her creepy boyfriend, Aldys (Crivello) attacks her in a gym parking lot. The gorgeous woman—a witch, apparently—returns to Jeff's apartment with him and mystically heals his physical pain. The next night, they make love, and Miranda becomes Jeff's live-in girlfriend after warning him that he doesn't know what he's “getting into.” Before long, members of Miranda's coven, led by the evil Ms. White (Lindley), accost Jeff in his office and demand he return Miranda to their fold. He refuses, but a spooked Miranda disappears suddenly, and now Jeff must find out what has become of her. With the help of a police detective (Takaga) and his friend at the law firm, Derek (Rossovich), Jeff discovers that Miranda is scheduled for human sacrifice—her heart is to be ripped out—on midnight before the coming winter solstice. She can only be spared if a willing sacrifice takes her place there, under Aldys's knife.

COMMENTARY: A little bit of *Fatal Attraction*, a pinch of *The Wicker Man* (1971) and one heaping tablespoon of *Rosemary's Baby* grant the direct-to-video release *Spellbinder* a compelling and sexy horror veneer. First and foremost, the film represents an urban yuppie fantasy gone wrong, and it's on those grounds that the movie succeeds.

Jeff Mills, played slickly by handsome Timothy Daly, is a yuppie lawyer with an interest in art. He's athletic too (so his business suits fit nicely) and one night, he rescues a damsel in distress in a parking lot, thus proving he's “hero” caliber, which is important in the image-conscious late-80s. As for Miranda, she looks good enough to share a bubble-bath and a bottle of champagne with, and this spectacular first

impression is soon reinforced. She even passes muster with Jeff's most important peer group—his critical male buddies—because she can cook, makes love like a champ, and is just quirky enough with her apparent New Age Paganism to seem both erotic *and* exotic. Only another woman, Jeff's rock-solid, maternal secretary suspects that Miranda—every red-blooded yuppie's fantasy girl—is simply too good to be true.

There are a couple of colliding themes in *Spellbinder*. The first involves the movie's recognition of the fact that Jeff lives a shallow, empty and lonely life where surface image is *everything*. He drives a nice car, boasts an expensive art collection, and rents a nice apartment. So when Miranda comes into his life, she's another trophy to put in its spot, even if underneath her gorgeous demeanor she hides a terrible secret. This is yet another example of that “don't worry/be afraid” duality. The good news (be happy!): your new live-in lover is gorgeous, the bad news (be afraid!) is ... she's a member in a Satanic cult and wants you to be her perfect sacrifice.

Another theme involves the faithless Los Angeles society that Jeff willingly participates in. Miranda is different from Jeff and his friends because she “has” religion. Of course, that religion happens to be Satanism, but at least she believes in *something* other than the quest for the almighty dollar. By contrast, Jeff and his buddies live a godless life devoted to accumulating wealth and looking good, so much so that Jeff is unable to conceive of the idea that Miranda might have true religious convictions.

The most compelling reason to watch *Spellbinder*, if you can locate this rarity on VHS, is to witness hot, young, future star Kelly Preston disrobe for the tawdry sex scenes. And disrobe she does, frequently. *Spellbinder* arrived during the span between *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*, when dangerous couplings were all the rage in low-budget fare like this and *The Drifter*. This is a better film than *The Drifter*, but it evidences the same attraction/repulsion factor that always dominates these films. On one hand, casual sex with gorgeous partners is an irresistible fantasy. And on the other hand, there's that fear that the fantasy will carry a terrible price. In life, that price might be herpes or AIDS, but in movies, it might be a sacrificial rite involving the yanking out of a heart. Written by Tracy Torme, who penned some of the best early episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Spellbinder* navigates this path skillfully, keeping audiences both tantalized and fearful for much of the film's running time. And, although shot for home video, *Spellbinder* actually boasts some nice atmospheric night exteriors ... not to mention those steamy bedroom interiors.

They Live

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“A satire of the Reagan years: raunchy, low-budget, inventive and goofy.”—John Clute, SF: *The Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Dorling Kindersley, 1995.

“[Carpenter’s] best film for years ... is a model of taut B-movie narrative skills ... An excellent formula film, *They Live* is almost something more ambitious as well.”—Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, page 1218.

“Tastes great, less filling. The spoofy stuff early in the film is obvious but nevertheless hilarious—it’s easy to send up American consumerism and conformity, but it never gets old, at least not for me. Still, by the time Carpenter gets to Piper’s classic line: ‘I have come here to chew bubble gum and kick ass, and I’m all out of bubble gum,’ the film has devolved into the same old rote SF actioner ... almost the kind of pap the first half of the film delights in satirizing.”—MaryAnn Johanson, The Flick Filosopher, film critic.

“John Carpenter watches wrestling, gets tired of Reaganomics, and throws in aliens. There are people who love this film. It’s pleasant enough to watch, but it leaves you with the same feeling as having played a computer game—some time has passed, you’ll never get it back again, and you’re strangely tired, but energized at the same time. Its heart is in the right place, but its methods are suspect—Carpenter probably crossed the line in which storytellers are supposed to parody their subjects but not mimic them so closely that it becomes just a veiled attack. And I don’t even like the folks he was attacking—it just seems a little too heavy-handed for this viewer.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Roddy Piper (John Nada); Keith David (Frank); Meg Foster (Holly Thompson); George “Buck” Flower (Drifter); Peter Jason (Gilbert); Raymond St. Jacques (Street Preacher); Jason Robards, III (Family Man); John Lawrence (Bearded Man); Susan Barnes (Brown Haired Woman); Sy Richardson (Black Revolutionary); Wendy Brainard (Family Man’s Daughter); Lucille Meredith (Female

Interview); Susan Blanchard (Ingénue); Norman Alden (Foreman); Dana Bratton (Black Junkie); John P. Goff (Well-Dressed Customer); Norman Wilson (Vendor); Thelma Lee (Rich Lady); Stratton Leopold (Depressed Human); Rezza Shan (Arab Clerk); Norman Howell (Blond Haired Cop); Larry Franco (Neighbor); Tom Searle (Baker).

CREW: Alive Films presents a Larry Franco Production. *Music:* John Carpenter, Alan Howarth. *Associate Producer:* Sandy King. *Film Editors:* Gib Jaffe, Frank E. Jimenez. *Art Directors:* William J. Durrell, Daniel Lomino. *Director of Photography:* Gary B. Kibbe. *Based upon the short story* “Eight O’Clock in the Morning” *by:* Ray Nelson. *Screenplay:* Frank Armitage [John Carpenter]. *Produced by:* Larry Franco. *Stunt Coordinator:* Jeff Imada. *Directed by:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: “It’s business ... that’s all it is ... What’s wrong with having it good for a change? ... What’s the threat? We all sell out every day, you might as well be on the winning team!”—A collaborator (George Buck Flower) espouses a 1980s philosophy in John Carpenter’s biting satire, *They Live*.

SYNOPSIS: An out-of-work loner, John Nada (Piper) tries to find a job in Los Angeles, and spends the night in a shanty-town called Justiceville after befriending another homeless man, Frank (David). That night, a hacker breaks into the local TV transmission and attempts to warn the populace that is being duped, being made to “sleep” while a conspiracy exists to keep the poor in poverty and the rich wealthy. Nada walks to a church that he suspects is the source of the signal, and the next day finds a cache of sunglasses there. When he puts on a pair, John is shocked to see that the world is in black-and-white, and that subliminal messages urging humans to consume are everywhere. Worse, ghoulish aliens seem to mingle with humans unnoticed. After an extended fight over the subject, John convinces Frank to don the glasses too. After the destruction of Justiceville, John and Frank attempt to join a resistance against these aliens—entrepreneurs who treat Earth like a third-world resource and can do so because of human collaborators. John and Frank hatch a plan to destroy the hypnotic signal and wake up the sleeping populace of Earth. But a traitor is in their midst.

COMMENTARY: By its very name, a “message” film is something that—though it may be good for you—doesn’t necessarily go down easy. John Carpenter’s 1988 satire *They Live* is unequivocally a message film, but it is also unusually good-tasting; an easily digestible entertainment which nonetheless raises serious and provocative

questions about American life in the 1980s, what Carpenter views as the impact of MTV, rampant yuppieism, and the aftermath of the Reagan Revolution.

That sounds like quite a heady brew for a 95-minute action film (and one featuring a lengthy wrestling interlude to boot!). Yet Carpenter's story of alien invasion is a brilliant social commentary, a horror-science fiction adventure with as much heart and mind as spectacle and action. Though in the final analysis, the film falters in its overlong street fight, *They Live* nonetheless remains suspenseful, inventive, shocking and even revolutionary.

In his screenplay, penned as Frank Armitage, Carpenter gazes at homelessness, unemployment, poverty, racial prejudice and violence as the result of two things: the Reagan era of voodoo economics in which the wealth never really trickled down beyond the most financially successfully "upper" echelon of American society; and the emergence of television as a corporate-owned avenue through which they sell, sell, sell. The eminence of MTV and its quick-cut imagery only insured that a product could be sold more quickly, more effectively and with more glitz. So while some Americans became poorer and poorer because of new economic realities, they also felt a stronger desire to consume. They wanted more things because of the constant stream of messages being fed to them on the boob tube.

Appropriately then, *They Live* is a depiction of the post-Reagan malaise (a state of mind that *Entertainment Weekly* once termed, simply, being "Bushed"), a United States suffering consequences for the prosperity of the few: a shrinking middle class, increased homelessness not seen since the Great Depression, a resurgence of racial prejudice, and so forth. To dramatize this world, Carpenter opens *They Live* with a shot of graffiti, an art form of America's underclass. Tracking left from the wall of graffiti, his camera detects a loner, John Nada (Nada, of course, meaning nothing), as he strides into the opulence and majesty of a glittering, glass and steel Los Angeles metropolis.

The camera remains on Nada (Roddy Piper) and the mood is perfect for Carpenter's message. Piper is not traditionally good-looking or heroic in appearance. This is a man who has taken his knocks (literally) on the wrestling mat. This casting works, and as Piper walks L.A. accompanied by the bluesy strains of Carpenter's brilliant score, a tone of melancholy and bad times is established. We are now in the world of a drifter, of a homeless fella.

This mood is further enhanced as Nada seeks employment and is thoughtlessly shooed away—as if a fly—by an officious bureaucrat. Again, a pointed message is delivered: Society would prefer men like Nada to remain silent and invisible, to leave the rest of us “productive members of society” alone. After all, President Reagan himself pointed out on many occasions that many homeless people were “homeless by choice.” Also, he told interviewers numerous times that when he opened a newspaper he saw plenty of ads for jobs, so the unemployed must simply be ... lazy.

Reagan’s responses were shamefully facile answers to a complex problem. Nada and his dilemma are reminders that not all Americans are created equal, that many people with solid work records and good family values had not been carried away by the artificial prosperity generated by the Reagan 1980s. This self-assured opening sequence, all set against a granite-gray sky, is one of *They Live*’s greatest assets. It sets the film’s battleground perfectly, before the narrative about aliens even kicks in.

The driving philosophy of yuppieism—“Me first, me second, and me third”—is also skewered in *They Live*. Where corporate America and the “free enterprise” aliens seek to gain wealth by separating men from their consciences (because it’s easier to cheat people and look the other way), the homeless and unemployed are dramatized in starkly different hues. The ironically named Justiceville is what metropolitan Los Angeles is not: a community. Children (of various races, no less) play together in peace, a mother reads lovingly to her child, people cook for one another and share communal responsibilities (like repairing outhouses and the like). Thus Justiceville as its names suggests is a community of liberty and equality “where everybody knows your name.” It is a utopia, an oasis of decency in a world dominated by selfishness and avarice.

And, in typical Carpenter fashion, Justiceville is also short-lived. The community and all it represents is a threat to the alien overlords, who thrive only when people think about their own material needs, and not the needs of the society at large. Justiceville is mercilessly torn down, exterminated like a roach infestation in Carpenter’s vision of 1980s America. According to the elite, whether it be yuppies or aliens, it is better that Justiceville should be a parking lot for BMWs than a place where economic “losers” and lazy people pollute the rich’s view of the grand city on a hill.

They Live establishes its mood of melancholy almost immediately, successfully introduces the viewer to a “real” community in

Justiceville, and then accomplishes one other thing in its opening segment. It establishes the total pervasive influence of TV on American culture. Looking carefully, the attentive viewer will notice that TVs appear everywhere in the film, even in the Justiceville utopia. Carpenter displays on these sets some of the most vapid programs and commercials imaginable, so as to demonstrate how television sells America an image and asks people to emulate it, no matter the cost. “All I need is to be famous,” one actress on the tube croaks with desire, measuring her life and value by the television-culture controlled by wealthy corporations. If only she had a talk show, or could become a celebrity, she will have reached Heaven, she says. This insight seems particularly relevant in the new millennium and the age of reality TV. What Carpenter boldly envisioned in 1988 was a world in which Americans are consumed and enslaved by television, by the dream of striking it big, at the expense of such historical pillars as culture, decency, community and justice.

In the most inspired use of television, Carpenter at one point depicts a TV program in which a bald eagle flies gracefully over the natural beauty of the United States, a symbol of liberty, opportunity and patriotism. He then contrasts that image with grim reality. Over poverty-stricken Justiceville, black helicopters circle, not soar. They’re vultures, not eagles. Oppression has replaced opportunity.

Much of *They Live* serves as an indictment of the capitalist system. Frank, by all standards a good man who has been unable to see his wife and kids back in Detroit for six months because he cannot find work at home, enunciates the new Golden Rule of the Reagan Revolution: “He who has the gold, rules.” He also states in succinct terms the essential unfairness of capitalism as rule of law: “Do what you can to get ahead, but I’m going to do my best to blow you away.” How can anybody prosper in a world of such intense competition? What about the values of the Bible? Of helping our fellow man? Of treating even your enemies with kindness and respect? Where do these values fit into the world of “free enterprise,” “incentives” and “competition”? Frank also suggests an inflammatory course of action if another factory is closed and more workers (like the Air Traffic controllers of 1981?) are mercilessly laid off. Frank advocates taking a hammer to the executives’ “fancy, foreign cars.”

To temper this radicalism, however, Carpenter has Nada make a rejoinder. “I believe in America,” he says. “I follow the rules. Everyone’s got their own hard times these days.”

That more even-handed view, however, is ultimately overturned as

They Live moves to its denouement. After the betrayal by Holly Thompson, it is clear there is really no longer an “America” to believe in, merely state-sanctioned greed and an alien upper class, possibly representative of yuppies, Republicans, or even foreign investors like the Japanese. Whatever part of the consumer, corporate culture the aliens represent, they feed off the labor and travails of the poor. Carpenter, like Nada, wants to hold hope for his country, yet the values which once shone so brightly in the American town square have become meaningless catch-phrases or sound-bytes for politicians (aliens, per *They Live*) who care only about getting richer and opening up new markets so that even more wealth will become available.

When Nada wakes up from the Reagan dream of prosperity for all (to hell with the deficits, or social programs), he realizes the cost and rebels. He becomes, essentially, an anti-government radical bent on destroying the establishment. In 2006, he'd be termed a terrorist. Nada may indeed be nothing by his very name and the alien way of thinking, but in an important sense he is the last patriot because he rebels against the alien message. He will not conform; will not consume; will not submit; will not stay asleep while community becomes a quaint, obsolete notion. He will question authority, and even as he dies, his final act is one of defiance: He gives the police the bird, angrily raising his middle finger.

Besides attacking yuppie values, Carpenter takes some shots at other forces in modern America in *They Live*. There are alien presidential candidates (and indeed, the film opened just days before the 1988 general election), and even alien film critics: Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert types are revealed as aliens even as they complain that George Romero and John Carpenter have gone too far in depicting violence on film.

In another relevant moment, Carpenter references the horrible late 1980s Ted Turner trend of “colorizing” old films. To Carpenter, the real world is black-and-white and the aliens have “colorized” us! Carpenter also takes square aim at the L.A.P.D. in the film, and in one sequence prescient of the Rodney King beatings, dramatizes cops clubbing an unarmed man to the point of death.

If the satirical, deeply political *They Live* falters at any point, it is in the overlong fight sequence in a Los Angeles alley. Nada and Frank deliver devastating blows, one after the other, that would certainly kill a man. Yet the fight continues interminably, with only bloody noses and bleeding lips as the result. This fight arises out of Carpenter's love of professional wrestling—the WWF (now the WWE)—which was

sweeping the nation in the late 1980s. But in some fashion, this lengthy fight over a pair of sunglasses seems to reaffirm the alien argument that human beings, even the best of us, can be stupid animals.

LEGACY: In the 21st century, an episode of the Comedy Central *South Park* series featured an homage to *They Live*. Timmy and Jimmy, *South Park*'s two handicapped children, engage in a lengthy fight that evokes, shot for shot, the Nada-Frank smackdown of Carpenter's film.

The Unholy



Cast and Crew

CAST: Ben Cross (Father John Michael); Ned Beatty (Lt. Stern); William Russ (Luke); Jill Carroll (Millie); Hal Holbrook (Father Mosely); Trevor Howard (Father Silva); Peter Frechette (Claude); Nicole Fortier (Demon); Ruben Rabasa (Father Dennis); Phil Becker (Doctor); Martha Hester (Young Nun); Norma Donaldson (Abby); Earleen Corey (Lucille).

CREW: Vestron Pictures and Limelite Studios Present a Team Effort production. *Casting*: Rueben Cannon & Associates, Carol Dudley. *Executive Producers*: William Quigley, Dan Ireland, Frank D. Tolin, Wanda S. Rayle, Duke Srotkas. *Associate Producers*: Oscar L. Costo, Michael Economou. *Production Designer*: Fernando Fonseca. *Art Direction*: Jose Duarte. *Special Visual Effects Designer*: Bob Keen. *Special Effects Sequence*: Movie Magic Emporium, Christopher Anderson. *Director of Photography*: Henry Vargas. *Music*: Roger Bellon. *Film Editor*: Mark Melnick. *Written by*: Philip Yordan, Fernando Fonseca. *Produced by*: Matthew Hayden. *Directed by*: Camilo Vila. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 102 minutes.

INCANTATION: "There is a constant war between God and Satan. God chooses a man to be his champion in this fight. You must fight the Devil."—Uncle Sam, or the Church, wants Father Michael (Ben Cross) for a Heavenly purpose in *The Unholy*.

SYNOPSIS: While attempting to talk down a suicide jumper from a ledge, Father John Michael (Cross) is attacked by a demon and hurled down seventeen stories ... yet he miraculously survives. Because of this miracle, Father Mosely (Holbrook) and the blind priest Father Silva (Howard) assign Father Michael to St. Agnes, a parish in New

Orleans troubled by the deaths of two former priests. Father Michael opens the church and soon befriends a young virgin named Millie (Carroll), the last person to have visited with Father Dennis (Rabasa), one of the dead priests. He learns that she works at a satanic night club run by a small-time thug and nonbeliever named Luke (Russ). Luke is worried, however, because he has started to experience odd disturbances in his apartment, and fears the Devil may be after him. Before long, Father Michael learns that it is his destiny to be “The Chosen One,” God’s champion in a fight that will see him battle with a female demon (Fortier) who will attempt to seduce him. This demon (called an “Unholy”) can only appear between Ash Friday and Easter Sunday, and if she should succeed in making Father Michael sin, he will be cast to Hell for all eternity like his two predecessors. During the final battle with the demon, the Unholy comes to Father Michael in the form of Millie, and he must do everything he can to resist her advances.

COMMENTARY: The religious horror film probably earns a sub-category all its own in the annals of the horror film. The best is likely William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1974), followed by Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976). However, the list also includes such high-profile 1980s efforts such as *The Seventh Sign* (1988) and the less well-remembered *The Unholy*. If *The Exorcist* concerned the very nature of good and evil in the universe, *The Omen* was an apocalyptic story, and *The Seventh Sign* dealt with self-sacrifice, *The Unholy* treads on the much more individual, personal matter of temptation.

The Unholy is the story of a heroic priest, Father John Michael, played ably by *Chariots of Fire* (1981) star, Ben Cross. Michael has been selected by the Almighty to battle the Devil in what amounts to a periodic Earthly contest pitting Man against Demon. This isn’t traditional combat, however. It’s much more psychological in nature, playing on human weakness, desire and foible. If the demons can get Father Michael to disavow his beliefs, abandon his vow of celibacy and have sex with a woman, they win. Accordingly, the Devil tempts Father Michael with visions of female pulchritude that would turn most mortal men into slobbering idiots.

Interestingly, Father Michael resists the obvious temptations. He isn’t lured to his undoing by the red-headed beauty who appears in a sheer, revealing dress in the film’s opening acts (the one who comes before a kneeling priest ... and kills him). At the film’s end, this woman, a servant of the “Unholy,” a creature that traps sinners and sends their souls to Hell, sidles up to Father Michael and rubs against his body. There is full, frontal nudity.

However, what really tempts Father Michael is not wanton, lustful sex with a *femme fatale* (even though he imagines her seductive dance in a dream). Instead, it is clear that Michael has a hero complex. He wants to “rescue” and convert a girl like Millie, a fallen, virginal, girl-next-door type. To each his own, but the demons do themselves no favors in this conflict by routinely visiting several horrors upon Michael. After all, it’s difficult to focus one’s attention on the job at hand (or a sex fantasy) when you keep waking up to find snakes roiling over your crotch, as Michael does at one point. Maybe the Almighty sent the serpents as a reminder that Michael is supposed to stay pure and that Millie, and indeed all matters surrounding the crotch, are but an evil distraction. God works in mysterious ways, after all.

In the final analysis, *The Unholy* is somewhat tedious, and not especially artistically made horror film. Cross’s performance in the lead role is strong, but his innate dignity is undercut by some weak special effects in the finale and the over-the-top Bosch-ean qualities of this demonic incursion.

Late in the proceedings, for example, tiny rubbery demons nail Cross to the altar, and up from the Earth arises a very rubbery demon. It licks Michael up and down his legs, which—again—kills the mood of the desire the demons would seem to be inculcating. When the monster takes female form again, she boasts saggy, frightening breasts so it’s no wonder—given all this horrific sound and fury—that (in an echo of Lucio Fulci’s *The Beyond*) Father Michael is rendered blind by the experience. If the demons *really* wanted to co-opt him, they wouldn’t have tipped their hand so many times and tormented the man of the cloth with horrifying visions like the snakes, the drooping mammary, and the licking monsters. So *The Unholy* must also contend with matters of motivation and believability, in addition to some poorly conceived effects.

The Unnamable

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Charles King (Howard Damon); Mark Kinsey Stephenson (Randolph Carter); Alexandra Durrell (Tanya); Laura Albert (Wendy); Eben Ham (Bruce Weeks); Blane Wheatley (John Babcock); Mark Parra (Joel Manton); Delbert Spain (Joshua Winthrop); Colin Fox (Mr. Craft); Paul Farmer (Mortician); Katrine Alexandre (Alyda).

CREW: K.P. Productions Inc., presents a Yankee Classic Picture. **Executive Producer:** Paul White. **Film Editor:** Wendy J. Plump. **Director of Photography:** Tom Fraser. **Additional Photography:** Greg Gardiner. **Original Score:** David Bergeaud. **Theme Song** “Up There” **written and performed by:** Mark Ryder, Phil Davies. **Production Designer:** Gene Abel. **Special Makeup Effects:** Christopher Biggs. **Produced by:** Dean Ramser. **Screenplay by:** Jean-Paul Ouellette. **Based on a story by:** H.P. Lovecraft. **Directed by:** Jean-Paul Ouellette. **MPAA Rating:** R. **Running time:** 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Miskatonic University, Randolph Carter (Stephenson) and his friends Howard (King) and Joel (Parra) discuss the storied and strange history of nearby Winthrop House, where an unnamable, indescribable, three hundred-year-old horror is rumored to dwell. Joel investigates the legend for himself and is brutally murdered by a bellowing, wild-maned beast.

The next day, Wendy (Albert) and Tanya (Durrell) plan to pledge a sorority and join two frat brothers, Bruce (Ham) and John (Wheatley) in Winthrop House for a night of scares and fooling around. The night turns deadly, however, and it's up to Howard and Randolph to rescue the foursome. Once inside the house, Carter discovers the Necronomicon, which may hold the key to keeping the house's evil creature, Alyda, trapped there for all of time.

COMMENTARY: There are things in this universe—things so horrific—that the human mind cannot conceive of them. That's the thrust of this tepid, low-budget adaptation of an H.P. Lovecraft short story, *The Unnamable*. What begins on that interesting note, however, quickly degenerates into a clichéd tale about two dumb jocks and two insipid girls spending the night in a haunted house, hunted down by a hooved, howling monster.

In the cavalcade of direct-to-video horrors, *The Unnamable* is actually a good deal better than most efforts, including the latter *Silent Night, Deadly Night* and *Sleepaway Camp* films, and it even makes some attempt to capture authentic period details early on. Unfortunately, the director's efforts are undercut by actors who deliver their dialogue as though practicing for elocution class. They speak with precision in a declarative and slightly flat tenor, which at times becomes highly amusing.

The Unnamable is also undercut by cheap production values. When the actors, playing hunted characters in the grip of desperation, rattle locked doors, the flimsy set walls all around them shake and bounce.

All of the pre-production money must have gone towards the creation of the demonic creation, Alyda, which is quite impressive, and very scary.

Where *The Unnamable* fails most dramatically is its script, which starts strong and then meanders into an interminable second act where characters walk back and forth through empty rooms, separated from each other briefly, then joining up, then seeing friends killed, then wandering around some more. Not much else happens, and the final act *deus ex machine*—the intervention of tree spirits thanks to the discovery of the Necromonicon—is undercut by the absurd sight of actors cringing before flapping tree branches.

Also, a quick question: Is this movie set in the 1980s or the 1950s? Characters dress in poodle skirts and letterman sweaters like it's 1955, but make 1980s-style wisecracks about “horizontal dancing” (sex) and “wetting your wick” (more sex).

Although based on superior source material from a horror legend, *The Unnamable* is a relatively flat and inferior variation on the same story featured in the Linda Blair horror effort, *Hell Night*. Rent that one instead.

LEGACY: Jean-Paul Ouellette helmed a sequel to this film, also starring Mark Kinsey Stephenson as Randolph Carter, entitled *The Unnamable 2: The Statement of Randolph Carter* (1993).

Vampire at Midnight

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jason Williams (Roger Sutter); Gustav Vintas (Dr. Victor Radikoff); Lesley Milne (Jenny Carlon); Esther Alise (Lucia Giannini); Jeanie Moore (Amalia); Ted Hamaguchi (Capt. Takato); Robert Random (Al Childress); Jonny Solomon (Lee Keller); Barbara Hammond (Kelly); Eddie Jr. (Bobby Rio); Christina Whitaker (Ingrid); Shendt (Raoul); Mike Wiles, Mike Tino, Richard Kory (Gunmen); Mike Kehoe (John); Kathryn Lee (Patsy Subaru); Tom De Antonio (John); Eric Leviton (Lasky).

CREW: *Presented by:* Skouras Pictures and Vampire Ltd. *Music:* Robert Etoll. *Film Editor:* Kaye Davis. *Director of Photography:* Daniel Yarussi. *Story by:* Jason Williams, Tom Friedman. *Screenplay by:* Dulany Ross

Clements. *Produced by*: Jason Williams, Tom Friedman. *Special Effects/Makeup by*: Mecki Heussen. *Directed by*: George McClatchy. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Mornings are not good for me.”—A quip from the vampire, Radikoff, in *Vampire at Midnight*.

SYNOPSIS: In Los Angeles, the police are stumped for clues at the roadside crime scene of the ninth so-called “vampire murder.” Unbeknownst to cops like rogue detective Roger Sutter (Williams), the perpetrator is Dr. Victor Radikoff (Vintas), a master of hypnosis and self-actualization. Radikoff sets his vampiric sights on aspiring pianist Jenny Carlon (Milne), Roger’s neighbor and would-be girlfriend. Jenny finds herself increasingly seduced by the master-hypnotist and his promises to make her a star, to help “empower her to break through limits.” Roger finally learns the truth and races to Radikoff’s villa to stop the final vampirization of Jenny. But he is expected, and with the help of the silent minion Raoul (Shendt), Radikoff hopes to feed Roger to the easily beguiled Jenny.

COMMENTARY: A slow-paced, low-budget direct-to-video effort, *Vampire at Midnight* skirts the edge of technical competence, and at times, is a rather laughable film, primarily for its lack of polish.

In its intense mediocrity, *Vampire at Midnight* actually straddles a number of genres. It may see itself as a *film noir*, as it focuses on a hard-boiled detective and his relationships with women, one perhaps even a traditional *femme fatale*. Or is she?

And then there’s the softcore sex aspect of the film. Late in *Vampire at Midnight* (far too late, actually), there’s a graphic sex scene between Sutter and a very attractive, young female cop named Lucchia. This interlude has absolutely nothing to do with any other element of the film, and appears to have been inserted randomly. At this point in *Vampire at Midnight*, Sutter is pretty clearly in a relationship with the pianist, Jenny. In fact, he is trying to rescue her from the so-called vampire’s evil, foreign grasp. Yet, here’s this pretty hot sex scene.

With the inclusion of a wrong-headed police superior and the investigation aspect of the story, *Vampire at Midnight* may even consider itself something of an action film, along the lines of contemporaries such as *Lethal Weapon*.

Amongst all these elements, what is *Vampire at Midnight*? It’s a boring, workaday film about a brand of charming cult leader who isn’t even

really, alas, a vampire. Radikoff gets punched out during the film's finale (yes, the plot resolves itself with well-placed fisticuffs), and fake plastic vampire teeth fall from his mouth. It's quite a disappointment. And a guy who goes to all the trouble of drinking blood, staying up nights, and having a bodyguard named Raoul can't be bothered to purchase more expensive fangs to better sell his illusion? Sheesh.

The biggest problem with *Vampire at Midnight* is that not much of the film is achieved with anything approaching professionalism. In one shot near a garage, the shadow of the cameraman and crew is painfully obvious on the pavement. And then there's the painful interlude involving Radikoff's tutelage of Lee, a stand-up comedian with low self-esteem. "Energy. Power. Focus," Radikoff encourages him.

The movie could have used a little more of all three.

Waxwork

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Zach Galligan (Mark Loftmore); Deborah Foreman (Sarah); Michelle Johnson (China Webster); Dana Ashbrook (Tony); Miles O'Keeffe (Count Dracula); Charles McCaughan (Inspector Roberts); J. Kenneth Campbell (Marquis De Sade); John Rhys-Davies (Werewolf); Patrick Macnee (Sir Wilfrid); David Warner (David Lincoln); Jennifer Baseley (Mrs. Loftmore); Joe Baker (Jenkins); Eric Brown (James); Clare Carey (Gemma); Buckley Norris (Lecturer); Jack David Warner (Junior); Christopher Bradley (Stephan); Anthony Hickox (English Prince); Edward Ashley (Professor Sutherland).

CREW: Vestron Pictures presents a Steffan Ahrenberg/Mario Sotela Production, an Anthony Hickox film. *Art Director:* Peter Marangoni. *Costume Designer:* Leonard Pollack. *Music:* Roger Bellon. *Special Effects Makeup:* Bob Keen. *Film Editor:* Christopher Cibelli. *Production Designer:* Gianni Quaranta. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Lively. *Line Producer:* William W. Edwards. *Executive Producers:* Mario Sotela, William J. Quigley, Dan Ireland, Gregory Cascante. *Produced by:* Staffan Ahrenberg. *Written and Directed by:* Anthony Hickox. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: "They'll make a movie about anything nowadays."—Lincoln (David Warner) makes a tongue-in-cheek remark in *Waxwork*.

SYNOPSIS: A group of privileged, well-to-do high school students attend a private midnight showing at the new neighborhood wax museum, run by the mysterious stranger named David Lincoln (Warner). One after the other, the youngsters disappear into the exhibits, which are time capsules of real horror scenarios.

The selfish Tony (Ashbrook) disappears into the forest world of a werewolf (Rhys-Davies), and is bitten by the lycanthrope, becoming a werewolf himself. The snotty and promiscuous China Webster (Johnson), at war with wealthy Mark Loftmore over his inability to be suave, becomes a victim to Count Dracula (Miles O'Keeffe), and so forth.

Mark and his friend Sarah (Foreman) learn that Mark's dead grandfather and godfather, Sir Wilfred (Macnee), have fought Lincoln before, and that his plan is to get eighteen victims into the waxwork exhibits, thus enabling the resurrection of the most evil men in history, including Jack the Ripper, the Mummy, Dracula, the Phantom of the Opera, and others.

Sarah is seduced by the Marquis de Sade (Campbell), but Mark learns how to escape each private world, and rescues her from the sting of the sadist's whip. Still, Lincoln accomplishes his goal and all eighteen evil men are brought back into the real world. But they run up against Sir Wilfred's army of volunteers, and the final battle between good and evil begins in earnest.

COMMENTARY: A minor late-1980s hit on videotape, *Waxwork* is a funny little horror trip, and one that achieves a nice, warm sense of nostalgia about classic movie monsters better than most films during the 1980s, including such non-starters as *Fade to Black* (1980) and *The Monster Squad* (1987). *Waxwork* is silly, riddled with campy humor, saddled with a mess of a climax—which looks more like a cafeteria food fight than the apocalypse—and, in the end, pure fun.

This Anthony Hickox film adopts the central organizing principle of the classic *House of Wax* (1953)—the wax museum—and then uses that locale as the introduction to a series of set pieces that reflect horror history. It's the ultimate in short-attention-span theater, as each “wax world” lasts about five minutes and features a high-profile kill. Delightfully, the film doesn't skimp on making these sequences both colorful and memorable. Although we could all do without his catchphrase (“that's gotta hurt!”), Dana Ashbrook gets bitten by a werewolf, played as a human by John Rhys-Davies, and gets shot himself as he begins to transform.

Even better is the Dracula set piece, which involves a very bloody scene in the count's basement, where China discovers her fiancé ... his right leg eaten, a rat gnawing at his stump. Oddly, this castle basement is a stark, hospital white, which means that the blood just shows up better against its tiled walls.

Each wax world in the film is an example of the rubber reality paradigm, and like the later *Nightmare on Elm Streets*, each character gets exactly the death (or torture) they deserve. China, for instance, longs for an urbane man who treats her right. What she gets is a European gentleman, Count Dracula, who bites her on the neck (and it's more orgasmic than horrific). Meek little Sarah, played by fetching Deborah Foreman, apparently has a kinky side and so ends up in the hall of the Marquis De Sade, played with randy glee by J. Kenneth Campbell. "I do get bored whipping ... horses," he intones with theatrical flair. Later, he insults Mark with a line that's always useful with romantic rivals, "Don't be angry, just because she had her first orgasm by the end of a whip and not your touch."

It's a camp hoot that this supremely silly movie, a dash of swashbuckle and a pinch of horror, makes its case that all these evil men in the Waxworks were real historical figures, including the Phantom of the Opera, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Mummy, Dracula, the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* (!) and so forth, but that shouldn't keep one from enjoying the movie. It's a low-budget effort with lousy sets (and some terrible miniature effects in the fiery finale) but it's also ingenious and strangely involving. The film gets more confident as it goes along its merry way, until it reaches its pinnacle of excitement (and character fireworks) with the Marquis de Sade.

The final battle, between Patrick Macnee and David Warner, is a crowded free-for-all that's more laughable than scary, but *Waxwork* is a horror addict's delight, as it drops willy-nilly references to *Little Shoppe of Horrors* (1986), *It's Alive* (1973), *Evil Dead 2* (1986), plus all the great classics from yesteryear.

Rubber reality is hit or miss as a subgenre because movies of this type can spiral out of control if the rules of the game aren't made clear to viewers. This is one arena where *Waxwork* excels, and so the fantasy sequences have a kind of logic to them. "This isn't real," says Mark. "If I don't believe in this, none of it exists." Most of the time that works, but belief, as Mark discovers with Sarah, isn't always easy to come by. And worse, what if a character wants to believe? What if your girlfriend wants to stay with the Marquis de Sade? Again, good horror movies have rules, and great horror movies know how to stretch those

rules.

Waxwork is more inventive than it need be, and almost giddy in its resuscitation of the classic monsters. Overlook the script deficiencies, the cheap production values, the crowded climax, and what you have here is a decent collection of “best of” moments with your favorite ghouls and creeps.

LEGACY: A markedly less fun sequel to *Waxwork* arrived on video in 1992, *Waxwork II: Lost in Time*. Zach Galligan again starred.

1989

January 24: The sociopath and serial killer Ted Bundy is executed in Florida, having confessed to over 30 murders. Some believe he killed as many as one hundred people.

February 24: The Ayatollah Khomeini puts a bounty of three million dollars on the head of Salman Rushdie, author of The Satanic Verses. Rushdie quickly goes into hiding.

March 14: President Bush signs into law a ban on assault weapons, earning him the enmity of the NRA.

March 24: The oil tanker Exxon Valdez runs aground in Alaska's Prince William Sound, spilling ten million barrels of oil there. This is the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history.

June 3: The Ayatollah Khomeini dies.

June 4: Chinese troops crush a pro-democracy student protest in Tiananmen Square, Beijing.

July 5: Seinfeld premieres on NBC-TV.

August 20: Beverly Hills rich kids Lyle and Erik Menendez kill their parents, and set off a media storm.

September 21: Hurricane Hugo wreaks record havoc in South Carolina, causing 7 billion dollars of damage.

November 7: In Virginia, Douglas Wilder wins the governorship, becoming the first African-American state governor in the country. On the same day, another African-American, David Dinkins, wins the mayorship of New York City.

November 9: The Berlin Wall comes down.

December 20: U.S. forces invade Panama to bring down "ruthless dictator" (and former C.I.A. informant) General Manuel Noriega.

Critical Reception

“...a live action Roadrunner cartoon with grotesquely exaggerated violence.”—Mike Mayo, *Videohound’s Horror Show: 999 Hair-Raising, Hellish and Humorous Movies*, Visible Ink Press, 1998, page 23.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Terry Potter (Ozzy); Pete O’Herne (Barry); Craig Smith (Giles); Mike Minett (Frank); Peter Jackson (Derek/Robert); Doug Wren (Alien Leader); Peter Vere Jones (Voice of Alien Leader); Dean Lawrie (Alien Leader Double); Ken Hammon, Michael Gooch, Robin Griggs, Laurie Yarrall, Shane Yarrall, Dean Lawne, Philip Lamey, Costa Bates, Graham Butcher, Andrew McKay, Clive Haywood, John McTavish, John Newlson, Graham Nesbitt (Third Class Aliens).

CREW: Wingnut Films presents, in association with the New Zealand Film Commission, a Peter Jackson Film. *Written, Edited, Produced and Directed by:* Peter Jackson. *Consulting Producer:* Tony Hiles. *Post-Production Supervisor:* Jamie Selkirk. *Music:* Michelle Scullion. *Sound Mixer:* Brent Burge. *Additional Material by:* Tony Hiles, Ken Hammon. *Film Crew:* Ken Hammon, Peter O’Herne, Terry Potter, Mike Minett, Craig Smith, Dean Lawrie, Philip Lamey. *Special Effects and Makeup Effects:* Peter Jackson. *MPAA Rating:* Unrated. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Extra-terrestrial low-lifers from a planet of “Charlie Mansons” attack a small town in New Zealand and are met with lethal force by a team of macho government assassins. The aliens come from a fast food company called Crumb’s Country Delights, which hopes to export the homo sapiens “taste” across the galaxy, thereby assuring the mass slaughter of four billion humans. The team of assassins rescues a would-be meal from the aliens, and kills the majority of the bad guys. A crazy bugger named Derek (Jackson), whose brain is falling out the back of his head because of an injury, stows away aboard the alien spaceship (designed as a house) to track down and murder the nefarious Alien Leader (Wren).

COMMENTARY: Peter Jackson is perhaps the ultimate geek filmmaker. Way back in 1988, the guru of *Lord of the Rings* (2001–03) and *King Kong* (2005) created a low-budget horror effort entitled *Bad Taste*. It’s a wet movie filled with gory splatter, but one also littered with knowledgeable allusions to classics such as *The Thing* (“I’ve been watching the skies,” says one character) and even *Star Trek* (a reference to “beaming down”).

More significantly, *Bad Taste* appropriates part and parcel the entire film aesthetic of *Evil Dead* director, Sam Raimi. It moves at a gonzo, frenetic pace, features Three Stooges-style, comic violence and slapstick humor, and boasts many incredible, nearly acrobatic camera movements. So *Bad Taste* may be a fine film technically, but to misquote *Boogie Nights*, it lacks originality. All of its energy comes from the imitation of another's work (in Hollywood that would simply be termed "homage"). More to the point, perhaps, *Bad Taste* lacks even the most modest sense of discipline and that means the picture goes on too long but actually goes nowhere.

Lacking discipline, one may note, is Jackson's Persian flaw as a director. His *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is twice as long as it need be and woefully diffuse from a narrative standpoint. For example, the much-ballyhooed *Return of the King* (2003) features at least two endings too many, after two battles too many. This author found Jackson's *King Kong* (2005) an amazing labor of love—a brilliant re-do of a classic—yet other critics complained about the same facets I found worrisome in the *Rings* saga: It was too long, and there simply wasn't enough story to sustain a movie of that length.

The problem, one suspects, is that Jackson is such a film geek, such a lover of cinema, that he simply can't discipline himself to tell his story in an effective way. The trick to making a good movie is to shoot good material, and then hone it in editing. At that point, cut out the bad stuff so that the good stuff is closer together, and voila, you've got a good movie. That process never seems to occur in Peter Jackson's films. He needs, above all, a stern editor.

An objective viewing of *Bad Taste* reveals that Jackson had all the same failings as a young, low-budget movie maker that he's evidenced since *The Two Towers* (2002), perhaps the most hemming-and-hawing and unnecessary of the *Rings* films. *Bad Taste* features an inspired concept and some funny, downright wacky movements. It's bold in its depiction of blood and guts (and very goopy), but the action sequences carry on interminably and are choreographed so chaotically that terrain, position and players are all hard to ferret out.

Bad Taste's biggest problem is simply that it relies on tired, slapstick jokes (like bird shit landing on a man's face) and repeats the same sort of joke over and over again until it's just not that funny anymore. The final shoot-out is extended beyond reason, *beyond tolerance*, and so ultimately a bore. Even the dynamite gore effects get featured so repeatedly that they tend to lose their effect by the time of the messy *coup de grâce*.

Watching this movie, I couldn't help but be reminded of Anthony, the powerful young character from the "It's a Good Life" episode of the original *Twilight Zone* (and featured in the film, directed by Joe Dante). Spoiled and indulged because of his abilities, little Anthony could wish people into a corn field and force his adult companions to watch insipid, excessive entertainments, including cartoons and movies featuring dinosaurs roaring and fighting endlessly. *Bad Taste* is the kind of movie Anthony would have enjoyed watching (and inflicting on his elders). It's nothing but sound and fury. There's noting but noise to latch onto.

Bad Taste is tailor-made for people with the mentality of a thirteen-year-old, which explains its popularity with that demographic in the late 1980s. It's loaded with jokes, gore, flying bullets, slapstick, two-dimensional villains and the like, yet unencumbered by plot development, intelligent dialogue, characterization and even a point. It's excessive solely for the point of being excessive. It's in bad taste, as the title indicates, and there's certainly a level at which some people might consider that entertaining. But not me.

For this is not the assured, early masterpiece of a great genre filmmaker, like say Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead*, Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* or John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct*. It's a one-note geek movie created by a guy who just *loves* movies but can't discipline himself to make it a good geek movie. It's Peter Jackson as Peter Pan, but at some point, even he needs to grow up and make a movie that adults can enjoy too.

Blind Fear

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Shelley Hack (Erika Breen); Jack Langedijk (Bo Fenner); Kim Coates (Ed); Heidi Von Pelleske (Marie); Ron Lea (Cal); Jan Rubes (Robert Lasky).

CREW: Lance Entertainment, in association with Allegro Films Presents a Tom Berry Production. *Film Editors:* Franco Battista, Yves Langlois. *Casting:* Anne Tait, Elite Productions. *Director of Photography:* Rodney Gibbons. *Music:* Michael Melvoin. *Production Designer:* Richard Tasse. *Screenplay:* Sergio Altieri. *Executive Producer:* Rene Maio. *Produced by:* Pierre David, Franco Battista. *Directed by:* Tom Berry.

Running time: 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three violent thugs rob an armored car in Maine and their leader, Ed (Coates), murders the guards. To evade local police, they seek haven at the remote White River Lodge, an inn being closed that very day, where the blind switchboard operator Erika (Hack) is waiting to be picked up by her cousin, Harry. The insane Ed kills the inn's gentle old caretaker, Lasky (Rubes), and in a night of terror, hunts Erika through the house, from attic to basement. But Erika is a resourceful fighter and sets booby traps for the nefarious killers, picking them off. In the end, there is a survivor of the terrible night ... and a twist in the tale.

COMMENTARY: The 1960s gave the world Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*, the 1970s Mia Farrow in *See No Evil* (1971) ... and the '80s *Blind Fear* starring Shelley Hack. Based on the progression in that cycle, it's probably a good time to retire this old trope, the "thriller" involving a clever blind woman menaced by murderous psychos.

It's very much a case of the blind leading the blind in this direct-to-video quickie, a film that consists primarily of Hack wandering through the dark corridors of an abandoned hotel, "feeling" her way along walls, and acting on same master strategy the audience isn't aware of. Though Kim Coates (*Waterworld* [1995]) always plays a convincing psycho, even his over-the-top, psychotic performance can't compensate for *Blind Fear*'s total lack of momentum.

Up and down the stairs Hack's character goes, back and forth, down this corridor and up that one, plunging the lodge into darkness after compromising the fuse box. But a question of logic does arise here. If Hack's character, Erika, is blind, how does she know that her gambits are working? How does she know that each trick worked, and that she isn't in plain sight of the bad guys? The movie never answers that question satisfactorily.

The best scene arrives when Coates' character pursues Erika into the attic. It's an intimate, creepy moment. He thinks he's playing hide and seek with a vulnerable blind woman, and Hack is good at registering terror. Of course, Coates is actually the mouse, not the cat. There's even some real suspense as Hack leads him through a hole in the floor.

Such clever moments, however—including the one with the bear trap—are *de rigueur* in this brand of thriller. Audience members will predict the story arc: a "handicapped" woman turns her supposed

weakness (lack of sight) into a strength that allows her to defeat the bad guys. The only modification to this formula involves the ending, which comes out of left field and ultimately doesn't do the movie any favors.

Burndown

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Firth (Jake); Cathy Moriarity (Patty Smart); Hal Orlandini, Hugh Rouse, Michael McCabe.

CREW: Cinetrust Entertainment presents a Loggia production. *Screenplay by:* Anthony Barwick, Colin Stewart. *Casting:* Leonard Finger. *From a novel by:* Stuart Collins. *Music:* Tony Britten. *Film Editor:* Les Healy. *Director of Photography:* Michael McCabe. *Production Design:* Michael Fowley. *Associate Producers:* Ed Fredericks, John Philips. *Executive Producers:* Rod Conway, Len Dean. *Produced and Directed by:* Colin Stewart. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A murder on the road in Thorpeville, Florida near the old nuclear plant catches the attention of a local police chief, Jake (Firth). The body and clothes of the raped and murdered women (the third victim so far) are highly radioactive, and so Jake checks the mothballed power plant. What he encounters is a strange conspiracy to keep the truth secret. Working with Jake is Patty Smart (Moriarity), a plucky reporter who has also smelled an interesting story in the murder spree and the proximity of the plant. It seems that an accident there years earlier was far more serious than anyone imagined, and what's worse, there are still survivors inside ... and at least one of them is a radioactive freak twisted enough to kill.

COMMENTARY: The nuclear fears so prevalent in the 1980s (and explored in genre films as diverse as *The Children* [1980], *Parasite* [1983] and *Dreamscape* [1984]) burn themselves to a cinder in the ridiculous, strung-together, thrill-less horror movie called *Burndown*.

A deadly dull tale of a strange corporate conspiracy, the film lumbers towards a weak climax that involves that James Bond cliché, "the Talking Villain," which involves an antagonist who—in lengthy exposition—proceeds to explain the movie's incomprehensible storyline. Finally, it all ends with a big explosion.

Peter Firth, late of *LifeForce* (1985), portrays a Southern sheriff. Never mind that Firth's a British chap, you'll hardly notice his English-Southern accent. Firth plays a character with a scandal in his past (shades of Robert Forster in *Alligator*?), and is so gravely concerned about the local crisis (five murders occur in seven days) that he leaves town—and the movie itself—to go fishing.

That's right, the star of the movie disappears in the middle of the proceedings to go on (an undepicted) vacation. I must confess, this is the first time I'd ever seen that occur in a movie. Maybe Firth needed a week off from the production to perfect that drawl?

Cathy Moriarity portrays a character who graduated from the Lois Lane school of journalism. She's the plucky lady reporter cliché dramatized so frequently, but the actress adds a level of sleaze and desperation to *Burndown*, as though the character is merely marking time between cocktail hours.

On a narrative level, *Burndown* makes little sense. The idea is that five years earlier, a nuclear power plant suffered an accident. Several deformed survivors have been living there ever since, slowly dying off. One radioactive monster has been getting out lately to rape women on the highway. The company that made the power plant knows about the secret, and wants it kept a secret. So, ask yourself—as chief executive of that company, wouldn't you issue an order to an underling and get an elite team of explosive experts to blow up the plant, make it look like an accident, and destroy the evidence? Ultimately, the evidence is destroyed in an explosion anyway (by the film's hero, Firth), so if you knew you had culpability and had to live every day with the fear that a green radioactive monster was going to make the local news by going out to rape people, wouldn't you just order the place destroyed instead?

There are also four sex scenes in *Burndown*, and still the main character has time to go fishing off-screen. Maybe he should run for president.

Cameron's Closet

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Cotter Smith (Sam Taliaferro); Mel Harris (Dr. Haley); Scott Curtis (Cameron); Chuck McCann (Ben Majors); Leigh McCloskey

(Pete); Kim Lankford (Dory); Gary Hudson (Bob); Tab Hunter (Owen Lansing); Dort Donald Clark (Alan Wilson); David Estruardo (Captain Navarro); Wilson Smith (Joe Crespy); Kerry Nakagawa (Policeman); Skip Lowe (Newscaster).

CREW: Smart Egg Pictures Presents a Luigi Gingolani Production of an Armand Mastroianni Film. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Ermanno Biamonte. *Creature created and constructed by:* Carlo Rambaldi. *Casting:* Barbara Remsen and Associates, Ann Remsen. *Prosthetic Makeup:* Alex Rambaldi, Rose Librizzi. *Production Designer:* Michael Bingham. *Director of Photography:* Russell Carpenter. *Film Editor:* Frank De Palma. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Screenplay by:* Gary Brandner, based on his novel. *Line Producer:* John S. Curran. *Executive Producer:* George Zerevic. *Producer:* Luigi Cingolani. *Stunt Coordinator:* Spiro Razatus. *Directed by:* Armand Mastroianni. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Cameron Lansing (Curtis) is a boy with dangerous telekinetic abilities, but his powers are controlled by his loving scientist father, Owen (Hunter). When Owen dies in Cameron's closet in what appears to be a freak accident involving a machete, little Cam goes to live with his mother and her abusive, bullying boyfriend, Bob (Hudson). Before long, the creature in the closet has also taken care of Bob, burning out his eyes and hurling him out a window. Meanwhile, a hard-nosed cop, Taliaferro (Smith), who seems to be having psychic dreams related to Cameron, and a kindly and police psychologist Dr. Haley (Harris) hope to learn the truth about the murders surrounding the Lansing family. They come to realize that Cameron has the ability to project into reality whatever he desires, and that somehow he has projected a real demon—Deceptor—into his closet. They must now stop the demon before he can kill Cameron, the only being on this Earth who can stop his reign of terror.

COMMENTARY: Say what you like about the early 1980s and the heyday of the slasher film, but at least the majority of those films actually looked like real movies. The directors made full use of the silver screen's rectangular frame—foreground and background—and often attempted to make these horrors somehow cinematic. Although the narratives were frequently unoriginal and so many efforts followed the slasher paradigm, at least one sensed a level of artistry in how that formula was executed.

But by the late 1980s, home video had so deeply and irrevocably infiltrated American pop culture that probably bigger audiences were seeing horror films on the boob tube than in theatrical release, and

most VHS videotapes featured altered, *square*, pan & scan versions of the films in question. Virtually overnight, horror movies began to look exactly like television. They grew square and box-like (like the TV), reliant on close-ups and medium shots, and boasted the production values of an episode of the syndicated *Tales from the Darkside*.

The entertainment industry attempted to cash in on the popularity of the horror genre with the knock-off, penny-pinching home videos *Sleepaway Camp II*, *Silent Night, Deadly Night II*, *Slumber Party Massacre 2* and the like. And alas, *Cameron's Closet* is another woefully inept film that looks like a TV horror anthology, only padded to last ninety minutes. For me, it is *Cameron's Closet* and its ilk that are difficult to watch, not slasher films, because there is no artistry in such efforts, nothing to admire at all. Bad filmmaking is now as prominent as bad sets, bad acting, and bad storytelling.

Looking like it came to audiences straight from the TV production factory, *Cameron's Closet* is a relatively routine story of a boy who hears flushing sounds coming from his closet, and realizes a demon has taken up residence there. The demon can only be given life by the will of an innocent child, and so the boy must face up to the demon, a metaphor for demons in his life; and indeed, there's one scene that involves incest in the shower, when Cameron's Uncle Allan gets attacked and killed. It's a basic template, worthy of the Lifetime Network, but not a full-length horror feature. Ultimately, the film settles down into an incomprehensible, "rubber reality" rut: The closet leads to one of the bottom levels of Hell, and everything is resolved in an unimpressive sound and light show that culminates with an explosion but signifies nothing.

There's so much to hate in this film. In particular, every character is a cliché. There's the evil, two-dimensional boyfriend, (who gets his eyes burned out, and is then tossed out a window). There's the hard-boiled cop, who suffers from bad dreams because of his previous brush with evil. Finally, there's the kindly female psychiatrist who is really just there to have a romantic relationship with the hard-as-nails, but really sweet cop. And finally, there's the little boy, the one who possesses all the power to stop the evil, if only he can find the power within himself to do so.

During this seemingly interminable movie, one character tells Cameron, "Through no fault of your own, you've unleashed something evil." The same could be said of the VHS market that gave rise to cheapskate, junk horror movies like *Cameron's Closet*.

The Church



Cast and Crew

CAST: Hugh Quarshie (Father Gus); Tomas Arana (Evan); Feodor Chaliapin (Bishop); Barbara Cupisti (Lisa); Antonella Vitale (Bride); Giovani Lomabrdi Radice (Reverend); Asia Argento (Lotte); Robert Caruso (Freddie); Alina De Simone (Lotte's Mother); Olivi Cupisti (Mira); Lars Jurgenson (Bruno).

CREW: Dario Argento Presents a film by Michele Soavi. *Based on a story by:* Dario Argento, Franco Ferrini. *Screenplay by:* Dario Argento, Franco Ferrini, Michele Soavi. *Original Music:* Keith Emerson, The Goblins. *Director of Photography:* Renato Tafuri. *Production Designer:* Antonello Geleng. *Costume Designer:* Maurizio Paiola. *Film Editor:* Franco Fraticelle. *Executive in charge of production:* Giuseppe Mongogna. *Directed by:* Michele Soavi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Hundreds of years ago, knights slaughtered a village full of suspected witches, threw the bodies into a mass grave, sealed up the site under a cross and built a church on the ground.

In the late 20th century, a librarian and an art historian discover a parchment hidden in the church catacombs, translate it and find the sealed tomb. They open it and become possessed by evil. As a demon plague begins to turn the people in the church into drooling zombies, the ancient gothic cathedral seals itself up in response, trapping a young couple on a school trip, the bishop and his staff, and a wedding party.

The bishop realizes the church's architect designed it with this unusual security system to prevent the exposure of the demon plague to the world. What's more, somewhere in the church there is a self-destruct button that can bring the whole church down to the ground and end this plague of evil. A young girl (Lotte) teams with a brave reverend to destroy the church.

COMMENTARY: Known in some circles as *Demons 3*, Michele Soavi's *The Church*—an Italian-made horror—opens with a literal dramatization of the Vietnam era proverb “To save a village, you must destroy it.” To wit, knights hunting down suspected witches kill the entire population of a village and dump the bodies into a mass grave.

It's overkill, but when fighting witches and demons, it pays to not take half-measures, I guess. You're either with us or you're against us, and all that.

The Church follows up the violent, bloody opening scene (which comes replete with a decapitation) with a neat and rather inventive plot about a present-day demonic infestation in a very impressive-looking Italian house of God. Fortunately, the church was built by a clever architect to include a primitive security system, and even a self-destruct switch ... in case of just such an emergency as a zombie apocalypse. Given this nifty set-up, much of the film involves the *dramatis personae*—dimwits mostly, alas—trying either to escape the ever changing church or flee the rampaging demons. It doesn't dawn on some of these folks that escaping the church would free the demon plague into civilization, but others understand the danger, and so this is *Night of the Living Dead* redux, with people under siege in a limited location arguing over the best course of action.

Despite a fascinating setting and central concept, this movie feels like the illegitimate child of the *Evil Dead* and *Demon* movies series, though strangely sapped of energy, narrative clarity and other redeeming factors. Many scenes are shot beautifully, however. Early on, for instance, there's a lovely transition shot from the past to the present.

The camera starts in “the earth” (literally, in the ground of the mass grave), goes up through catacombs and caverns, continues tracking upwards through the floor and supports of a man-made structure, and then reaches the main floor of a modern cathedral. The camera continues down the main aisle until a contemporary priest and a tourist are visible, and the audience has completed its arrival into the 1980s.

The visual legerdemain continues with some interesting, well-visualized sequences in which the church shifts and transforms its stones and wood foundations to seal off certain rooms and entrap the zombies (and sometimes the humans). It's an early version, perhaps, of the morphing Aztec temple seen in *AVP* (2004).

While moments of the film are admirable, *The Church*'s screenplay and Soavi's direction involving the characters prove insipid and insulting. Take the depiction of the film's female lead, an art historian named Lisa. She works in the church as her vocation, restoring art. Given such work, one would expect an intelligent, professional woman, right? But—as the dialogue makes plain—Lisa doesn't even know who the Teutonic Knights are!

Clearly then, Lisa must have failed Art History, or achieved her degree under the auspices of social promotion. Even funnier, when Lisa is depicting reading in the film, the book she's seen with boasts an illustration of Mickey Mouse on the cover. Yeah, she's an art historian, all right! Specialty: cartoon mice!

Finally, when the film's hero, Evan, breathlessly discusses the history of the newly uncovered ancient parchment with Lisa, she interrupts his discussion about this amazing discovery to ask him if he wants to go out for something to eat! Bluntly expressed, Lisa is the lamest art historian ever. She gets her comeuppance, however, since Evan—as a demon—has his way with her on a sacred altar later in the film.

Later, in another unintentionally funny sequence, Lisa is attacked by a demon and tries to call the police for help. She reaches a telephone in the nick of time, and—as though this is a tug of war—the demon starts tugging on the headset cord. Amusingly, Lisa keeps screaming into the phone, even as it retracts away from her, but fails to inform the police of her address. This is funny enough, but the police then manage to trace the call and reach the church in under thirty seconds. I guess in a movie like *The Church*, you've just got to take incidents like this on faith, and not seek logic.

A final note: The demon plague passes in *The Church* by scratch, just like in Lamberto Bava's *Demons*, and indeed, this film plays just like *Demons*. If *Demons* were slow, stupid, and incomprehensible, that is.

Communion

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Walken (Whitley Strieber); Lindsay Crouse (Anne); Frances Sternhagen (Dr. Duffy); Andreas Katsulas (Alex); Terri Hananauer (Sarah); Joel Carson (Andrew); John Dennis Johnson (Fireman); Dee Dee Rescher (Mrs. Greenberg); Aileen Fitzpatrick (Mother); R.J. Miller (Father); Holly Fields (Praying Mantis Girl); Paula Shaw (Woman from Apartment); Juliet Spacey (Second Grade Girl).

CREW: *Presented by:* Pheasantry Films in Association with Allied Vision Ltd. and The Picture Property Company. *Casting:* Penny Perry. *Main Theme Composed and Performed by:* Eric Clapton. *Additional Score:* Allan Zavod. *Production Executive:* Oliver S. Heard, Jr. *Film Editor:* Lee

Smith. *Costume Designer*: Malissa Daniel. *Production Designer*: Linda Pearl. *Director of Photography*: Louis Irving. *Associate Producer*: Richard A. Strieber. *Co-Producer*: Ed Simons. *Executive Producer*: Paul Redshaw, Gary Barber. *Screenplay by*: Whitley Strieber, based on his book. *Producers*: Philippe Mora, Whitley Strieber, Dan Allingham. *Special Makeup Mechanical Effects*: McCracken Studio. *Directed by*: Philippe Mora. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 103 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I didn’t want what they did to me. I didn’t want a rectal probe.”—Whitley (Christopher Walken) rages against the alien abductors in *Communion*.

SYNOPSIS: The Striebers of Manhattan spend a weekend in October with friends Sarah (Hananauer) and Alex (Katsulas) at their remote country house, but by night something strange occurs. Light suffuses the home, and Whitley (Walken), a horror novelist suffering from writer’s block, sees an intruder—a strange alien—in his bedroom.

Later, he remembers nothing but the screams of his son, Andrew (Carson), who was experiencing a terrible nightmare. On the night after Christmas, when the Striebers return to the forest cabin, a repeat of the strange events occur, and Whitley becomes paranoid about seeing intruders in the house. He awakens from a particularly bad night with a strange mark on his head, and complains of a headache. When the stress on his wife, Anne (Crouse) becomes too much, Whitley goes to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Duffy (Sternhagen)—who specializes in rape cases. She hypnotizes Strieber and takes him back to that first night in October, discovering that aliens visited the Strieber home and abducted Whitley.

These memories make Whitley realize that he has been visited by the aliens all his life, and that he has been chosen by them for some unknown purpose. As Strieber joins a group of abductees, he begins to put his abduction perception in perspective, and uses it to cure his writer’s block.

COMMENTARY: Wonders never cease: Philippe Mora has directed a good (but not great) horror movie. The talent behind *The Beast Within* (1982), *Howling 2: Your Sister Is a Werewolf* (1986) and *Howling III: The Marsupials* (1987) brings it on with *Communion*, an adaptation of Whitley Strieber’s best-selling tale of alien abduction. The film benefits from a quirky performance by Christopher Walken and a fine script that equates alien abduction with writer’s block, but *Communion* also succeeds by scarily evoking the feelings of night terrors. Considering these strengths, when the film turns pretentious and

hokey at its conclusion, all can be forgiven.

Communion's finest moment arrives early in the film, as the Striebers go to sleep in their isolated forest house for what they expect will be a quiet, peaceful night. It isn't. In the wee hours, Whitley awakens as an unearthly white light fills the home and the house alarm activates motion sensors. The audience doesn't know yet what to make of this development and in a whisper, Whitley fearfully croaks out "Is that someone there?" From Walken, this is chill-inducing by itself, but to the audience's horror and shock, there *is* something there, something living—*an alien*. It's already perched in Whitley's bedroom, watching and peeking at him from behind a dresser.

The aliens ultimately appear so often that they lose the capacity to surprise or scare, but in this quiet initial moment, the sudden appearance of an inhuman thing in such close proximity is jolting. If you've ever been seized by night terrors, or awakened from a peaceful slumber with the uncomfortable feeling that something is wrong in the room, this scene is familiar. I'll never forget a night in 2001 when I woke up at about three in the morning with the faint awareness that things were ... off. All three of my cats were at attention and alert for some reason, and I felt like I could sense movement—even *in the dark*—just over my head. I was right, a bat had gotten into the house and was fluttering over the bed. Circling.

It was a terrifying moment because there was awareness, grogginess and uncertainty co-mingled into some emotional brew that felt ... *primordial*. A wrongness suffused that room, and *Communion* gets that feeling of wrongness just right.

Mora uses the leitmotif of eyes to continue the horror. After his first creepy encounter with the aliens, Whitley starts to see the diminutive interlopers everywhere, and the eyes are the key. At a Halloween party, he's frightened by a kid in a costume, which triggers something that frightens him. He's scared and relates the mask to a repressed memory. "It's like I'd seen it alive. Real," he tells his skeptical wife. Later—on another visit to the cabin in the woods—Whitley opens a closet door and a Teddy Bear stares back at him with big circle eyes, another example of the recurring image. It also shows up later in a sculpture and a drawing of a reindeer, and it captures the fear of the alien presence: they're watching him with patient, but inhuman orbs, and he subconsciously feels the pressure of that memory.

The fear of abduction, of being stolen from your bed and shuttled off to an alien control room, also comes to play in the film, and these

efforts today don't work quite so well because the special effects have aged badly. The film was obviously made on a low budget and even Whitley's forest cabin is sometimes represented by an unconvincing miniature. Still, these problems are relatively minor, and the heart of *Communion* lies in the relationship between Whitley and his wife, played well by Lindsay Crouse.

Somewhere in *Communion* there's a message about trauma, and how to live through it. Whitley becomes paralyzed after the alien abductions, going to a rape group and seeing himself as a victim. His constructive response, which also eliminates his writer's block, is to deal with the aliens head on. To stop being afraid and use them as the wellspring of his creativity. By writing about them, he shatters their terrifying hold over his psyche. They become, simply, another element of his life, and fear dissipates. "The world is getting so small that it might be nice to meet someone new," Whitley finally suggests. Unfortunately, the script also requires Crouse to say mock-profound lines that would be better left unsaid, like "I think they gave you a gift. You better use it." Let the groaning commence.

By the time of that pronouncement, *Communion* has stopped being scary, and the film settles down for a series of bizarre and hokey philosophical remarks from Whitley and his wife. A camera tracks them as they stand awkwardly in an art gallery delivering deep, wise comments about the aliens and their nature. It's half-artistic, and half-cheesy, as the actors come perilously close to addressing the camera and the audience itself. Accompanied by stirring music, this denouement feels uncomfortably like a Hallmark moment.

Flaws and all, *Communion* works pretty well on a single viewing, when the audience isn't sure what yet to expect, and the film is able to pluck a note of uncertainty and fear that is quite potent. Once the story is known, and viewers can concentrate on such things as special effects and directorial miscues, *Communion* isn't so hot. So just see it once.

Cutting Class



Cast and Crew

CAST: Donovan Leitch (Brian Woods); Jill Schoelen (Paula Carson); Brad Pitt (Dwight Ingalls); Roddy McDowall (Mr. Dante); Martin Mull (Mr. Carson); Brenda Lynn Klemme (Colleen); Mark Barnet (Gary);

Robert Glaudini (Shultz); Eric Boles (Mr. Glynn); Dirk Blocker (Coach Morris); Nancy Fish (Mrs. Knocht); Robert Machray (Mr. Conklin); David Clarke (Crusty Old Man); Norman Alden (Officer); Tom Ligon (Mr. Ingalls); Bill Striglos (Mr. Quint); Ronnie Sperling (Mr. Tork).

CREW: Gower Street Pictures Presents an April Films Production. *Production Design:* Richard Sherman. *Music:* Jill Fraser. *Film Editors:* Natan Zahavi, Bill Butler. *Director of Photography:* Avi Karpick. *Executive Producers:* Peter S. Davis, William Panzer. *Written by:* Steve Slavkin, Rudy Cohen, Donald R. Beck. *Directed by:* Rospo Pallenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I am the custodian of your fucking destiny.”—Shulz (Robert Glaudini) the janitor sets Dwight (Brad Pitt) and Paula (Jill Schoelen) straight in the underwhelming *Cutting Class*.

SYNOPSIS: Home alone while her father (Mull) is away hunting, all-around good student and cheerleader Paula Carson (Schoelen) becomes embroiled in a mystery at school. Just as Brian Woods (Leitch) is released from a sanitarium, someone begins a series of horrible killings at the high school. The art teacher is burned alive in his own kiln, and Mrs. Knocht (Fish), the testy vice principal, is killed with her face pressed against a copy machine.

At a basketball game, Paula’s best friend, Colleen (Klemme) and her boyfriend Gary (Barnet) are murdered under the bleachers. Even the gym coach (Blocker) comes to a grim end, impaled on an American flag while jumping on a trampoline. At first, Paula suspects Brian, but he convinces her of his innocence and points the finger of blame at Paula’s self-destructing boyfriend, Dwight (Pitt). Dwight is failing all his classes, losing an athletic scholarship and generally acting like a jerk, but is he a homicidal maniac too? And what about Schulz (Glaudini), the creepy school custodian? Paula learns the identity of the killer in a final battle between good and evil, set in the high school’s auto shop.

COMMENTARY: Forget the nude photographs taken of him while he was sunbathing on his balcony, Brad Pitt should be concerned if *Cutting Class*, a ridiculous and poorly executed slasher film, ever gets before the public eye.

Actually, that’s an unfair attack on Brad Pitt. His performance is fine in this film, as are Jill Schoelen’s as our final girl and Donovan Leitch as the troubled Brian. These intrepid young thespians do themselves no lasting harm. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for veterans

Martin Mull and Roddy McDowall.

At least the youngsters take the movie and their roles seriously, but not these vets. They camp it up to high heaven, as though they couldn't be bothered to actually act serious and make the story fly. Instead, they act above it ... when the simple fact is they should have just acknowledged they were slumming and gone whole hog. Instead, we get shtick with McDowall trying on wigs in a backstage costume room, or Mull carrying on a conversation with a police dog. These are the scenes that truly wound the viewer.

Otherwise, by 1989 (the year *Cutting Class* was released), we'd seen all of this slasher stuff before. It's old school, so you've got your red herring (Schultz the janitor), final girl (the eminently likable Schoelen, who displays more intelligence than anyone else in the film), your former mental patient (Leitch) and your *coup de grâce*, in this case, a murder involving an American flag and a trampoline.

The other attacks involve an office copier, an auto shop classroom and a vise, and that old standby, death under the bleachers. There's even a suggestion of some homo-eroticism by the all-too-pretty Pitt and Leitch (shades of *Freddy's Revenge*), but unless you're into cataloging this stuff just for the sake of knowing it, you can safely cut this class and know you're not really missing much of importance.

What *Cutting Class* reveals most is that by 1989, horror filmmakers were exhausted with the slasher format and desperately in need of a new paradigm. Rubber reality was there ... but it's an expensive subgenre, dependent on cutting-edge special effects. By contrast, the early slashers (such as *He Knows You're Alone*, *Friday the 13th*, *My Bloody Valentine* and *The Prowler*) maintained, at minimum, a consistent atmosphere of dread; but these later ones (like *Cutting Class*) sought to tart things up with silly humor and bad jokes. That element makes a lot of the latter slashers pretty unwatchable, as all verisimilitude is lost.

Maybe if the jokes were actually funny...

Dead Calm

★ ★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"Great cinematography, music, performances, and lighting make a

fairly mundane story into something special. Phillip Noyce goes to town with the subject, and Sam Neill does a great job of keeping us interested in watching a guy on a sinking ship by himself. Graeme Revell's music does much to add to this film, and while a young Nicole Kidman and Billy Zane give star-making performances, it's Neill who gives the film verisimilitude and weight."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

"A taut and tense thriller. Young Nicole Kidman plays the most acquiescent rape victim imaginable, almost to the point where she seems to be the instigator. Good performances all around."—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nicole Kidman (Rae Ingram); Sam Neill (John Ingram); Billy Zane (Hughie Warriner); Rod Mullinar (Russell Bellows); Joshua Tilden (Danny); George Sheytssov (Doctor).

CREW: *Presented by:* Kennedy/Miller. *Casting:* Liz Mullinar, Wally Nicita. *Production Manager:* Narelle Barsby. *Costume Designer:* Norma Moriceau. *Production Designer:* Graham "Grace" Walker. *Director of Photography:* Dean Semler. *Film Editor:* Richard Francis-Bruce. *Original Music:* Graeme Revell. *Screenplay:* Terry Hayes. *Producers:* Terry Hayes, Doug Mitchell, George Miller. *Stedicam, Underwater and Aerial Camera Operator:* Ian Jones. *Directed by:* Phillip Noyce. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After the tragic death of their infant son in a car accident on a rainy highway, the devastated parents, Rae (Kidman) and John Ingram (Neill) take to the sea on their yacht to recover from the trauma. Three weeks into their voyage, John spots what appears to be a derelict ship.

A strange, athletic young man named Hughie (Zane) crosses the distance between the black schooner and the yacht in a dinghy and reveals to the Ingolds that his shipmates died of food poisoning. While Hughie is resting, a suspicious John goes over to the schooner without permission and finds the aftermath of a massacre. The ship is also sinking.

Meanwhile, back on the Ingram boat, Hughie commandeers the ship from Rae and leaves John stranded on the sinking ship. While John struggles to keep the *Orpheus* afloat, Rae desperately attempts to appease Hughie and maintain contact with her husband, so she can find him.

COMMENTARY: The sea symbolizes cleansing. At least that's how things are supposed to work in many movies (including 1978's *Coming Home*). Yet the sea is also a mysterious and dangerous realm that cannot be taken for granted, even by those who think they know her best. The sea may not be the expected calm after the storm, but the bigger storm after the storm.

That thesis is the unusual and compelling terrain of director Phillip Noyce's rip-roaring horror adventure, *Dead Calm*, a suspenseful character piece which finds a married couple traumatized at sea—mourning the death of their child—when unexpectedly confronted with a psychopath. This onslaught from a maniac is literally the bigger storm after the first storm, since *Dead Calm*'s earliest scenes depict a child thrown from a speeding automobile during a torrential downpour. The sea is supposed to be Rae's place to heal, to learn to live again.

Suspense grows unbearable as the heroic couple, played by Sam Neill and a very young Nicole Kidman, are quickly separated and must each face a new personal apocalypse. Independently of one another, they're each forced to confront what appears to be a hopeless situation. They persevere, in part spurred by their desire to reunite, and, in the end, their newfound strength helps them put their tragic history where it belongs, in the past. The sea has done its job, perhaps, just not in the way that John or Rae would have intended.

That equation might sound heavy-handed or obvious, but not so. *Dead Calm* is sleek and streamlined in its simplicity. The film consists of three people, two boats and an ocean. Both Rae and John are forced to deal with a universe of limitations, as they only have specific resources on which to erect a victory. John uses every trick in the book to keep the *Orpheus* afloat for as long as he can, and Rae has to make do with a dog, a tennis ball, a shotgun, prescription medicine, a dinghy and the sea itself.

In the film's most controversial and memorable scene, Rae uses another unusual weapon, her body. She has sexual intercourse with Hughie in an attempt to earn the madman's trust. It's clear that Rae meant at first only to use her wiles, to trick Hughie into bed (where he would be vulnerable) and then make a run for the shotgun or harpoon gun, so she could stop him.

That plan turns out poorly, and Rae is left with no choice but to deliver what she's promised. At this point, *Dead Calm*'s director, Noyce, moves to an overhead angle as Hughie mounts Rae, violently

tears off her shorts, and begins to make love to her. Then, the camera goes in tighter, for a close-up on Rae as she feels each thrust and push like a knife's blade. The physical and emotional pain broadcast on her innocent, virtually porcelain features, is staggering.

This sequence represents *Dead Calm*'s water cooler moment. It provokes debate and raises a number of conflicting emotions. Was Rae raped? Should Rae have resisted more strenuously? Or is she courageously doing what she needs to do to rescue her husband? Since both Zane and Kidman are quite beautiful, the scene takes on an even more loaded context. The scene ends before revealing if either character attained orgasm, though in Hughie's case, it's probably a slam dunk. But what about Rae? And perhaps, more importantly, would John want his wife to go this far, even to rescue him? Is Rae actually a hero because there's nothing she won't do to save her husband, even—on the surface—betray him? Many will also consider the sequence rape, since it is only under duress that Rae would ever consent to have sex with Hughie, but cannot a case be made that Rae willingly rolls with the punches, so to speak, as a means to an end?

One thing's for certain, it's a fascinating, disturbing and erotic scene. And *Dead Calm* never revisits it. Rae doesn't tell her husband (what he doesn't know won't hurt him) and Hughie isn't around to mention it, so perhaps it's a non-issue. Yet *Dead Calm* elicits fascination through this scene, because everybody asks themselves what they would do in that situation. With survival at stake, what option isn't on the table?

The remainder of the film cross-cuts between Rae's attempts on the yacht to defeat Hughie, and John's attempts to keep the *Orpheus* afloat. The cross-cutting seems to accelerate the film's pace, and at times, *Dead Calm* is so intense in its close-quarter combat that one is tempted to look away. Zane is perfect as the villainous Hughie, threatening to go over the top in every scene but maintaining a high degree of unpredictability so that his motives and actions remain an enigma. He's a man who is capable of anything, and thus incredibly dangerous. The mistake he makes is assuming that once he's slept with Rae, that problem is "handled." He never wins over her heart and mind, even though he's possessed her body, and so she eventually beats him.

Adding a little more *sturm and drang*, *Dead Calm* culminates with another storm at sea, a last minute rescue, and then an absurd sting in the tail/tale and *coup de grâce* (a flare in the mouth) that—while tense—reduces much of the psychological horror and gamesmanship of the film to the level of your average slasher.

Still, *Dead Calm* remains a great adventure at sea, a great horror film, and a stirring look at what two people in love will do to survive. I just hope that description doesn't make it sound like *Titanic* (1997).

Deep Star Six



Critical Reception

“[T]here are a few good jolts here—the best of which is probably the last. Most of the time, though, *Six* telegraphs its best punches in advance, while the *Ten Little Indians*—style scenario reduces a wildly contrived plot to a simple-minded series of confrontations...”—David Baron, “Undersea Chiller Sinks Before it Can Swim,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 24, 1989, page C9.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Taurean Blacque (Captain Laidlaw); Nancy Everhard (Joyce Collins); Greg Evigan (McBride); Miguel Ferrer (Snyder); Matt McCoy (Richardson); Nia Peeples (Scarpelli); Cindy Pickett (Diane Norris); Marius Weyers (Van Gelder); Elia Baskin (Burciaga); Thom Bray (Hodges); Rom Carroll (Osborne).

CREW: Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna present a Sean S. Cunningham film. *Executive Producers:* Mario Kassar, Andrew Vajna. *Casting:* Melissa Skoff. *Production Executive:* Becka Boss. *Film Editor:* David Handman. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Production Designer:* John Reinhart. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Story:* Lewis Abernathy. *Written by:* Lewis Abernathy, Geof Miller. *Produced by:* Sean S. Cunningham, Patrick Markey. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* James Isaac. *Creature Design:* Sahagamauw Productions, Inc. *Creature Effects and Special Makeup:* Mark Shostrom. *Creature Supervisor:* Greg Nicotero. *Optical Effects Supervisor:* Peter Parks, Jim Danforth, Bill Taylor. *Directed by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The diverse crew of an underwater research base, Deep Star Six, works overtime to construct a missile platform for the military, but research scientist Scarpelli (Peeples) objects when—to hurry things along—the crew detonates explosive over a previously shielded cavern that could be teeming with centuries-old sea life.

The explosion awakens a very large, cranky sea beast, which proceeds

to rip through an exploratory vehicle and mobile laboratory in short order. Captain Laidlaw (Blacque) and sub driver McBride (Evigan) race to rescue the survivor of the laboratory attack, the pregnant Collins (Everhard). The captain is killed in the attempt when a hatch crushes him and snaps his back. With their captain gone, the crew of Deep Star Six prepares to abandon the laboratory, but a twenty megaton warhead explodes nearby during a security procedure, rocking the base, causing structural deficiencies, severely limiting the air supply, and causing the reactor to begin a process towards meltdown.

Worse, the angry sea monster finds a way inside the base, devouring a technician named Richardson (McCoy) and his lover, Scarpelli. With time running out and its crew dwindling, the survivors of Deep Star Six prepare to fight the beast. A coward named Snyder (Ferrer) steals the last escape life-craft, but dies after failing to decompress. Now McBride has to go out into the open water where the creature awaits, swim to a sub, and pick up the remaining crew.

COMMENTARY: Sean Cunningham's *Deep Star Six* is a B-movie through and through, but an effective one nonetheless. A veteran director of such films as *Friday the 13th* and *A Stranger Is Watching*, Cunningham understands precisely how to pull our strings. His dedicated efforts in *Deep Star Six*—an underwater monster movie that could have just as easily been set in outer space instead—make viewers jump, gasp and occasionally groan, all at appropriate points.

Deep Star Six itself is the name of a rickety mining facility in the ocean, a “leaky can at the bottom of the sea,” as one character describes it. Interestingly, the “crew” reflects the advances in civil rights, and issues of race and sex made in America in the 1980s. To wit, the crew is not merely interracial in composition, but actually international. This demographic makeup might be termed the “we are the world” philosophy of interracial crews depicted in such films as *Alien* (1979), *2010: The Year We Make Contact* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), *Leviathan* (1989) and *The Abyss* (1989).

Almost universally, these crews are depicted as work-a-day “truckers,” “miners,” or other blue collar folks, with the occasional intellectual highbrow thrown in for good measure. Sure, they're testy, competitive, pressured, overworked (and sometimes unionized), and serving greedy corporate overlords, but they don't often gripe about male-female issues or the color of one's skin. Those things are taken for granted in the “ass end of space,” as *Alien 3* terms it, or, perhaps, more accurately in the case of many of these films, the ass end of the

ocean.



“Something big is headed this way...”: Snyder (Miguel Ferrer), Richardson (Matt McCoy) and Dr. Van Gelder (Marius Weyers) brace for the worst in *Deep Star Six*.

The crew isn’t the only facet of *Deep Star Six* that’s drawn straight from the sci-fi horror monster-movie play book. There’s also tons of technical gobbledegook, what *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s creators coined “technobabble.” “Check the stabilizers,” crewmen bark here, in between discussions of photo-migration, a theory of “aggressive animal behavior” associated with light. Such technobabble exists merely to grant the film the veneer of being technically accurate.

The clichés keep flying. There’s one character who is pregnant, and another who is the practical joker—both off-the-shelf stereotypes. There’s a self-destruct sequence too (*de rigueur* in this kind of a movie) and a sting-in-the-tail/tale moment when the monster—believed dead—unexpectedly resurfaces (and it’s a killer jolt, even though we’re expecting it).

Then there’s the sea monster itself, a rather convincing over-sized arthropod. It looks pretty nasty, and chews its way through an adequate body count, but ultimately this monster isn’t the true enemy. This is a movie wherein human error—and human panic—is the real

villain. The response to the giant sea monster causes more problems than the beast itself.

There's one infuriating character named Snyder, played by Miguel Ferrer. Snyder is to *Deep Star Six* what Burke is to *Aliens*. He's the Michael Brown of this particular hurricane, and his incompetence and defensive nature keeps making the situation worse. For instance, Snyder mistakenly detonates a twenty megaton nuclear missile near the base. This is a doozy of a stupid mistake, because it jeopardizes the installation, and eventually Snyder admits he doesn't know proper security procedure. Think he might have asked somebody before he pressed the button? Nah!

That's bad enough, but later—when hunting the beast—Snyder accidentally sticks one of his cohorts, Van Gelder, with a cattle-prod dart gun that causes the unlucky man to inflate and explode. Heck of a job, Snyder.

Of course, Sean Cunningham knows what he's doing with this hapless character, and so provides Snyder with a gory comeuppance. The cowardly Snyder flees the facility alone in a life pod, stranding the others, but he doesn't decompress. His bloody death scene in the bathosphere will have audiences cheering.

Later, human error rears its ugly head again when the doctor, played by Cindy Pickett, thoughtlessly opens a hatch and allows in the giant arthropod, which promptly kills her.

One might think that all these stupid actions would make the film less tense, or less fun, but the opposite is actually true. The film is so much fun, with its actors hip deep in water, with hatches smashing closed on unfortunate crew members, that I was sorry when it was over.

In the sweepstakes of 1980s underwater movies, *Deep Star Six* is, in some fashion, the best of the bunch. It isn't a cheap-jack ripoff like *Lords of the Deep*. It isn't as muddled as *Leviathan*, and it doesn't take itself nearly so seriously as *The Abyss*. *Deep Star Six* is just a fun, good old-fashioned monster movie, and I found it refreshing.

The Drifter

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kim Delaney (Julia Robbins); Timothy Bottoms (Arthur); Al Shannon (Kriger); Anna Gray Gardino (Mattey); Loren Haines (Willie Munroe); Miles O'Keeffe (Trey); Larry Brand (Morrison); Thomas Wagner (Captain Edwards); Ernest Alexander (Eugene); Joanne Willette (Carrie); Gil Christine (Gas Attendant).

CREW: *Presented by:* Concorde. *Production Design:* Stephen Greenberg. *Music:* Rick Conrad. *Film Editor:* Stephen Mark. *Director of Photography:* David Sperling. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Co-Producer:* Matt Leipzig. *Produced by:* Ken Stein. *Written and Directed by:* Larry Brand. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

“When you make love to someone, it’s a forever thing.”—A warning from Trey (Miles O’Keeffe) in the low-budget thriller, *The Drifter*.

SYNOPSIS: Fashion designer Julia Robbins (Delaney) picks up a drifter named Trey (O’Keeffe) after he fixes a flat tire for her on a desert road. When they stop that night at a motel, Julia and Trey passionately make love, but the next day, in Los Angeles, Julia tells Trey that it was just a one-night stand. Trey doesn’t take kindly to her casual attitude about sex, and begins telephoning her and showing up at her office. While Julia tries to keep her boyfriend, an attorney named Arthur (Bottoms), in the dark about the indiscretion, people around Julia begin to die, including her pregnant best friend (Willette). Julia is convinced that Trey is stalking her and goes to the police to report it, but there is no evidence to prove his guilt.

COMMENTARY: *Fatal Attraction* blew open the door for a whole raft of imitators in the late 1980s and early 1990s, begetting a slew of thrillers that attempted to “say something important” about male-female relationships at the same time that they appealed to the most lewd and lascivious aspects of human nature. In other words, these films inevitably included a lot of very athletic, voyeuristic sex scenes with tons of nudity.

Not that there’s anything wrong with that.

The Drifter is a low-budget, direct-to-video *Fatal Attraction* wannabe that sneaks in that open doorway from the Glenn Close-Michael Douglas film, but doesn’t really know what it wants to say about men, women, infidelity or any of the other hot button issues raised by *Fatal Attraction*.

The film focuses primarily on Julia, played by Kim Delaney, who doesn’t know how to express her sexuality, and thus keeps it walled

off from the rest of her life, both professional and personal. Sex with her boyfriend seems pretty underwhelming, and it may be that fact that leads her to a motel room indiscretion with the hunky Trey more than her gratitude over a repaired flat tire. But Julia is a confused character, and the screenplay is confused about her too. She says she doesn't want words to impede the sex with Trey, but then also longs for a man to physically protect her. She says that Trey isn't important to her, but then presents him with a precious hundred-year-old pocket watch heirloom.

In other words, *The Drifter* seems to explain that no matter how independent and liberated women are, what they really and truly desire is a physically strong man who can make them feel protected. And, even though that man may be obnoxious and stalk her at work and on the telephone, there's still some part of her that likes the attention. For, at the conclusion of *The Drifter*, guess who Julia ends up with? The one who can protect her, of course. The unshaven drifter himself.

This is probably an irresponsible viewpoint for a movie to take, though who can say it isn't true in some cases. But jeez, any movie that encourages a guy to insert himself into a woman's life and keep pressing, even when she says "no," just seems to be asking for trouble.

On a visual basis, *The Drifter* is as inept as they come. The sets are so threadbare that Delaney's apartment doesn't even boast a kitchen sink. It looks like the place was assembled on a soundstage in about two hours.

In the latter part of the 1980s, one might notice, there are a lot more white walls in cinema production design, and a lot of beige too. Everything became more two-dimensional and cheaper-looking. It's the influence of television, no doubt, and *The Drifter* is indeed framed for your boob tube screen, thus far less cinematic than most pictures of the 1970s or early 1980s. It's a throwaway film from a technical and stylistic standpoint, and one that went straight to video.

But, like several other horror movies of the 1980s, this film features a fairly hot (if tawdry) sex scene, includes a red herring type, and evidences a typical 1980s fear of the "outsider" or "other," in this case the socially unacceptable "biker," who is to be feared simply because he wears leather, rides a motorcycle and has five o'clock shadow. But if Julia was that afraid of his "kind," she shouldn't have hopped in the sack with him.

Edge of Sanity

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anthony Perkins (Dr. Henry Jekyll/Mr. Jack Hyde); Glynis Barber (Elizabeth Jekyll); Sarah Maur-Thorp (Susannah); David Lodge (Underwood); Ben Cole (Johnny); Ray Jewers (Newcomer); Lis Davis (Maria); Jill Melford (Madame Flora); Noel Coleman (Egglestone); Briony McRoberts (Ann Underwood); Mark Elliott (Lanyon); Harry Landis (Coroner); Jill Pearson (Mrs. Egglestone); Basil Hoskins (Mr. Bollingham); Ruth Burnett (Margot); Carolyn Cortez (Maggie); Cathy Murphy (Cockney Prostitute); Claudia Uday (Liza).

CREW: Edward Simons presents an Allied Vision Production. *Casting:* Maggie Sanguin. *Production Designer:* Jean Charles Dedieu. *Director of Photography:* Tony Spratling. *Music:* Federic Talgorn. *Film Editor:* Malcolm Cooke. *Screenplay:* J.P. Felix, Ron Raley. *Associate Producer:* James Swann. *Executive Producer:* Peter A. McRae. *Produced by:* Edward Simons, Harry Alan Towers. *Directed by:* Gerard Kikoine. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In late 19th century Whitechapel, England, the esteemed Dr. Jekyll (Perkins) is involved in a home laboratory accident, inhaling the dangerous fumes of his new anesthetic. The compound has drastic effects on Jekyll, transforming him into a monstrous (and murderous), sex-starved pervert, a fella by the name of Jack Hyde.

His first night out under his new guise, Mr. Hyde slits the throat of a prostitute, and then virtually dissects her. The next night, he does the same thing, in the process garnering a reputation and legendary status as Jack the Ripper. Jekyll spirals out of control, sharing his noxious potion with a hooker at Madame Flora's brother named Susannah (Maur-Thor) and a dandy named Johnny (Cole). Together, they form a drugged-out menage-a-trois.

Jekyll's wife, Elizabeth (Barber) grows concerned about her husband's odd behavior even as Scotland Yard begins to suspect he is responsible for the horrendous crimes. Elizabeth follows Mr. Hyde out one night, but is promptly discovered. She attempts to rein him back in, but Jekyll is too far gone.

COMMENTARY: Robert Louis Stevenson's novella, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was first published in 1886, just over a

hundred years before the arrival of *Edge of Sanity*, the umpteenth version of the story. Stevenson's famous tale about a doctor who invents a potion that separates him into a split personality, one good, one evil, has been in a success in every medium since its release. The novella was a smash, the story of Jekyll and Hyde became a successful stage play, and there have been film adaptations starring John Barrymore in 1920, Fredric March (an Oscar winner) in 1931, Spencer Tracy in 1941, and John Malkovich in 1996.

The crux of Dr. Jekyll's story is one particularly well-suited to the 1980s, the idea of an outward "good" appearance cloaking a more dastardly underside, one given to lust, avarice and corruption. Jekyll-Hyde figures in the 1980s include Oliver North—either a patriot or a criminal who lied to Congress, Jimmy Swaggart—either a man of God or a lustful man who solicited a prostitute, and Ivan Boesky—either a financial genius or the most brazen of thieves. Even Ronald Reagan was something of a Jekyll-Hyde figure, a cheerful, avuncular old man of good humor and charm on the surface, a scissor-wielding, unrepentant cutter of the social safety net in action. He was a conservative and a divorcee; a man who hated the size of the federal government, but who expanded it, a fiscal hawk who increased the deficit.

Over the last century, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde's double persona has been interpreted in numerous ways. In his original published incarnation, he was perhaps a representation of the Victorian moral code. As Dr. Jekyll, he was a respected man of the community but living in an age of strait-laced morality where certain tastes and predilections were off limits. As Hyde, he could secretly indulge in those things. Later films saw him a split personality psychologically (bipolar?) and made a case for the allure of evil. *Edge of Sanity*, by contrast to many earlier productions, focuses on the drug which changes Jekyll into Hyde. The "potion" of the story is explicitly made a modern addiction, a thing that alters Jekyll's faculties. In one scene in the film, Jekyll holds what appears to be a crack pipe and smokes his concoction, letting the smoke waft around his face. Since America had declared a war on drugs and Nancy Reagan guest-starred on the sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes* to "just say no to drugs," this variation on a theme seems particularly timely.

Although set in Victorian England, *Edge of Sanity* depicts a total punk, modern aesthetic. It has as much in common with *Sid and Nancy* (1986), the story of drug-addled Sid Vicious, as it does with *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. A modern, icy blue palette dominates the film, and some of the denizens at Madame Flora's brothel look like punk

rockers, complete with the affectation of red eyeliner and the like. Johnny has bleach blond hair and is a bit androgynous, which also makes the film feel modern with a gay subtext. Hyde rips off Johnny's trousers and caresses him as they watch a hooker strip and then they indulge in a kinky threesome. And as Jekyll sinks further into his drug stupor as Mr. Hyde, his eyes sink, he looks pale, drawn, thin and haggard—basically a heroin addict.

When Jekyll attempts to lay off the pipe, he becomes temperamental and his hands start to twitch. We can tell from episodes like this that he's going through the pains associated with withdrawal. And, like many drug users, Jekyll abuses his potion, the film suggests because of an incident he saw in childhood. In the first scene in the film, a little boy (Jekyll as a child) spies a woman having sex during a storm. Lightning flashes and the woman sees him. He is spanked after being discovered, and so associates sex with evil. Not surprisingly, Hyde is a sexual predator, a man who wants to explore all the things he was forbidden from knowing about as a youth.

Edge of Sanity isn't the first film to attempt to tie Mr. Hyde in with Jack the Ripper. That honor goes to Roy Ward Baker's 1971 opus, *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde*, but *Edge of Sanity* achieves a glory of its own. It removes much of the fantasy and monster material. Hyde in this film is not a creature or a ghoul, just a man on drugs with a fascination for sex. The modern punk aesthetic distinguishes the picture too, but ultimately it's a strung-out-looking Perkins, so dissolute and gaunt, who makes *Edge of Sanity* a memorable addition to the Jekyll-Hyde canon.

Perkins obviously carries baggage as the screen's most famous *other* split personality, Norman Bates, but there's nothing familiar or rehashed in his performance here. For all his murderous behavior, Norman feels like a child sometimes, an innocent "possessed" by the madness of Mother. Dr. Jekyll is different: He's a full-blown adult—and male—replete with a wife, who gets in over his head and learns that he is not the angel society paints him to be. Not many actors can so successfully convey conflicting, even contradictory emotions in a simple facial expression, but Perkins was a pro at this sort of thing. In *Edge of Sanity*, the actor creates a weak man, and one whose weakness is enhanced out through drugs, resulting in the "birth" of a decadent and debauched new personality. Perkins plays Dr. Jekyll as the ultimate junkie, a self-indulgent man who only feels alive on the potion. It's exactly the right interpretation for this punk variation on a well-worn theme, and it makes the allegory in *Edge of Sanity* work surprisingly well. Although the film was obviously made cheaply, the

limited production values are masked rather successfully by the lighting scheme (often a deep red for Hyde's world, or an immaculate ivory for Jekyll's).

The Fly II

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Animal rights activists should champion *The Fly II*, which takes experimentation way beyond the ethical line. But this poorly written, unengaging fable about the perils of science doesn’t serve its grander theme well.”—Candice Russell, “Abysmal Sequel *Fly II* Never Gets off the Ground,” *The Sun-Sentinel*, February 27, 1989, page 5D.

“This sequel to a remake isn’t a very good movie, but you have to give *The Fly II* credit for one thing. It has one of the nastiest final retribution scenes since the deformed sideshow freak got even with the mean trapeze lady in Tod Browning’s 1932 horror classic, *Freaks*.”—Harper Barnes, “Horror Flick Continues Disgusting Family Saga, *The Fly II*,” *The St. Louis Post Dispatch*, February 19, 1989, page 14H.

“Derivative, formulaic, jejune, *The Fly II* represents Hollywood ‘sequelitis’ at its most predictable. Gone are the cool wit and complex motivation of David Cronenberg’s magisterial predecessor, replaced by a splooshy passion play for teens.”—Charles D. Leayman. *Cinefantastique*, July 1989, Volume 19, page 47.

“I’ve seen some sick stuff on film, but few things as heartrending and horrific as the inside-out dog—it’s just godawful, and no number of reviewings can lessen how much it deeply disturbs me. Stoltz’s piteous reaction to the dog gets me every time. He’s mostly why this film constantly surprises me with how good it is, how much better than it deserves. He, as an actor, believes in it, in all its absurdity, giving it a grounding that it would not otherwise have had.”—MaryAnn Johanson, film critic, *The Flick Filosopher*.

“A thankless task, trying to follow Cronenberg’s fine original, but special effects wizard Chris Walas does a fine job, all things considered, in giving us a rapidly evolving fly-spawn in the guise of a rapidly growing Eric Stoltz. The film’s final act, the fly creature attacking his former benefactor, manages to present some pathos in rubber, as the special effects are responsible for portraying a monster

we're not supposed to hate. The fact that the film has a satisfactory ending is a surprise and a credit to the writers. Christopher Young's score adds much to the film's success."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Eric Stoltz (Martin); Daphne Zuniga (Beth Logan); Lee Richardson (Bartok); Harley Cross (Ten Year Old Martin); Gary Chalk (Scorby); Ann Marie Lee (Jainway); Frank C. Turner (Shepard); John Getz (Stathis); Matthew Moore (Four Year Old Martin); Rob Roy (Wiley); Andrew Rhodes (Hargis); Pat Bermel (Mackenzie); William Taylor (Dr. Trimble); Jerry Wasserman (Simons); Duncan Fraser (Obstetrician); Lorena Gale (Woman); Janet Hodgkinson (Nurse); Bruce Harwood (Technician); Tom Heaton (Manager); Bill Dow (Man); Andrea Mann (Cute Girl).

CREW: *Presented by:* Brooks Films. *Casting:* Deborah Lucchesi. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Production Design:* Michael S. Bolton. *Film Editor:* Sean Barton. *Director of Photography:* Robin Vidgeon. *Associate Producer:* Gillian Richardson. *Executive Producer:* Stuart Cornfield. *Screenplay by:* Mick Garris, Jim and Ken Wheat, Frank Darabont. *Story by:* Mick Garris. *Produced by:* Steven-Charles Jaffe. *Effects created and designed by:* Chris Walas. *Special Effects Makeup Supervisor:* Stephan Dupuis. *Stunt Coordinator:* John Wardlow. *Directed by:* Chris Walas. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Of course I want it to happen. You're the pattern and the prototype of a whole new age of biological exploration. With you as the model and the telepods as the tool, Bartok Industries will control the form and function of all life on Earth! ... Accept it. This was planned from the day you were born."—Bartok (Lee Richardson) explains why greed is good to Martin, son of Brundlefly in the Chris Walas sequel, *The Fly II*.

SYNOPSIS: The pregnant Veronica Quaife dies during the birth of Martin (Stoltz), the offspring of Brundlefly, genius physicist Seth Brundle. The boy grows up to become the subject of secret studies at Bartok Industries, which was sponsoring Brundle's experiments in teleportation and matter transmission.

Martin suffers from an accelerated growth process and is soon a young adult ready to resume his father's work with the telepods. He falls in love with a co-worker, Beth Logan (Zuniga), but soon gets very ill, suffering from genetic deformity ... the influence of fly DNA.

Martin determines that he could heal himself by fusing himself and a healthy human being, but that would be murder. But when Martin learns that Bartok himself (Richardson) has been waiting for Martin to transform into a human-sized fly, he begins to lose some of his reservations. Martin transforms into the monster, against his will, and is hunted by Bartok's men, including Scorby (Chalk). But all the while, Martin retains enough of his human intelligence to make for the telepod room, where, if he's lucky, he can finally reverse the process if he finds a suitable human tissue "donor." Luckily, Bartok fits the bill.

COMMENTARY: Better made, better directed and better acted than a predictable sequel has any right to be, *The Fly II* is a workable, if not inspired sequel to the David Cronenberg *Fly* remake of 1986. The *Fly II* relies on some hokey science (including the concept of accelerated aging), a rehashed romance, a few "greatest hits" from the previous films, and other disappointing elements, but underneath it all is a metaphor for the dog-eat-dog world of business, and Eric Stoltz and Daphne Zuniga (fresh from *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* [1981] and *The Initiation* [1984]) make for an appealing screen couple.

It was apparently too great a temptation to resist to make *The Fly II* resemble its progenitor. The tightrope-walk of all good sequels is that they must be similar enough to the original work to seem faithful and consistent, but different enough not to seem a rip-off. *The Fly II* unwisely selects another tragic romance (like Brundle and Veronica's in *The Fly*) to serve as its central relationship. So the audience is treated to scenes with the young couple making moon eyes at one another, dancing to country music, working in the lab, basically courting. The actors handle this material fine, but as far as doomed romances go, it's difficult to beat Cronenberg's film. More to the point, perhaps, any story involving the telepods could have served as the central narrative for *The Fly II*. Why choose a rerun romance? And one with callow kids? Still, to be fair, Stoltz brings a *gravitas* to his portrayal that suggests a wisdom beyond his years, and Zuniga is charming. It's just that they would probably do even better with fresher material.

But reruns, alas, dominate much of the movie. For instance, three moments from *The Fly* are resurrected. The first is the traumatic birthing sequence (which was a dream in the original), the second involves young Brundle unexpectedly catching a fly between his fingers (just like Daddy) and the third is the grisly moment wherein a malfunctioning telepod mangles a live animal, in this case a dog, rather than a baboon.

Still, *The Fly II* has a few nice surprises that keep it afloat. There's new (or perhaps rather just unseen) video footage of Goldblum's character, discussing how he feels after going through the telepod, and the film even makes an effort to say something about animal cruelty and experimentation. *The Fly II* came out in 1989, when experimentation with animals was a big deal on college campuses. I know, because I was at the University of Richmond, and a huge debate was being argued regarding the use of captive animals in the testing and making of perfume, and even the rights of colleges to use animals for dissection.

One side argued that the then-new technology of the "laserdisc" meant that science students could watch dissections performed by others, replete with freeze frames and slow motion frame-by-frame clarity, so that it was unnecessary to perform it themselves. This kind of debate finds voice in the film as Martin's pet dog is tested in the telepod and emerges a twisted, mutilated creature. It suffers terribly, and is cast aside by Bartok Industries, left to crawl to its food bowl on a straw floor at the bottom of a silo-like cage. This scene is horribly affecting, and Martin no doubt does the right thing when, after discovering the dog, euthanizes it. A boy and his mutant dog: is there anything more touching in a horror film?

There's also a droll, even mean sub-text to *The Fly II* concerning big business. The film's villain is a Kenneth Lay-type executive, Bartok, who will let nothing stand in the way of success (and profit). But, it's a dog-eat-dog world, and at the end of the film, Bartok has been dethroned. Worse, he's now at the bottom of the pecking order, both in the business world and the gene pool. Martin's cure involves splicing out all the fly DNA and other genetic garbage, and so Martin thoughtfully transfers it ... to Bartok. The last scene reveals how lowly Bartok has become, non-viable both as an executive and physically. He's now in the silo where he kept the mutant dog, crawling to his own bowl of gruel. The film's last shot is a fly landing on his food dish, in close-up, a reminder of his poor judgment.

It's terrific that *The Fly II* points out the evil of corporations and makes the evil executive pay for his misdeeds, but there's a certain nastiness to this. Martin finds the idea of killing another human being so he can be cured unacceptable, but since Bartok's a bad guy, he changes his mind. I'm not certain that's morality. It's convenience, it's revenge, maybe it's even cosmic justice ... but it isn't a moral thing to do.

The Fly II features a welcome return appearance by John Getz as Stathis and the special effects finale is quite astounding, with

Martinfly on a killing spree. These moments are successful, but, sadly, a reflection of how the *Fly* franchise went from being a story about people, to a story about the horrible things a monster does. It's easy to say it's okay, because Bartok and the guards are mean, nasty guys, but it's always easier to create two-dimensional villains than real people, and that's the inferior world—not unlike a *Friday the 13th*—that *The Fly II* deals in from time to time. Which ultimately makes it a disappointment.

Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan

★ ½

Critical Reception

“[A]n all-out bust, virtually telling the same story for the eighth straight time...”—“Jason Takes His Ax on the Road,” *Sacramento Bee*, July 31, 1989, page B6.

“No, Jason doesn’t take Manhattan in the latest installment of *Friday the 13th*, a series that has now been with us longer than Ronald Reagan was president.”—John Hartl, “Jason, and Film, Bad as Ever,” *The Seattle Times*, June 29, 1989, page C5.

“The continued success of these movies is remarkable. They have none of the perverse cleverness of the rival horror series, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*—just Jason chugging along, disemboweling and beheading along the way. Since only the most sympathetic and innocent couple can survive, there’s not even any suspense in seeing who’s going to make it.”—Daniel M. Kimmel, “Good Title Won’t Get Big Apple,” *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, July 29, 1989, page 20.

“[The movie] would be better titled, *Friday the 13th Part VIII—Jason Takes Manhattan Only After a Long and Tedious Sojourn on a Cruise Ship on Which Each and Every Student Dies and Deserves To.*”—Eve Sterne, “Tedium Dulls Blade of ‘Jason’ Slasher,” *The Buffalo News*, July 29, 1989, page C10.

“Most of the film is the same old Jason movie, but it gets fun when the old boy is finally walking around in what doesn’t really look to be New York City (but close enough). The trailer for this film, however, was absolutely classic, and worthy of membership in any best trailers list, of a man silhouetted against the New York City skyline as the camera slowly moves forward, only to reveal Jason at the last second. Priceless. See the trailer. Skip the movie.”—William Latham, author of

Mary's Monster and Eternity Unbound.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jensen Daggett (Rennie); Scott Reeves (Sean Robertson); Barbara Bingham (Colleen Van Deusen); Peter Mark Richman (Charles McCulloch); Martin Cummins (Wayne); Gordon Currie (Miles Wolfe); Alex Diakun (Deck Hand); V.C. Dupree (Julius); Saffron Henderson (J.J.); Kelly Hu (Eva Watanabe); Sharlene Martin (Tamara Mason); Warren Munson (Admiral Robertson); Kane Hodder (Jason); Todd Shaffer (Jim); Tiffany Paulsen (Suzi); Timothy Burr Mirkovich (Young Jason); Ace (Toby); Fred Henderson (Chief Engineer).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Horror Inc., Production. *Casting:* David Cohn, Fiona Jackson. *Associate Producer:* Barbara Sachs. *Music Composed and Performed by:* Fred Mollin. *Special Makeup Effects Created by:* Jamie Brown. *Mechanical Effects Coordinator:* Martin Becker. *Film Editor:* Steve Mirkovich. *Production Designer:* David Fischer. *Director of Photography:* Bryan England. *Produced by:* Randolph Cheveldave. *Written and Directed by:* Rob Hedden. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

INCANTATION: “There’s a maniac trying to kill us!”

“Welcome to New York!”—An exchange in *Jason Takes Manhattan*, the last *Friday the 13th* movie of the 1980s.

SYNOPSIS: When a yacht’s anchor electrifies an underwater cable near his corpse, Crystal Lake’s resident boogeyman Jason Voorhees (Hodder) is resurrected again. This time, he wastes no time in boarding the *Lazarus*, a cruise ship carrying Crystal Lake’s graduating class to New York City for a vacation.

Jason begins killing the ship’s crew and passengers, even as young Rennie (Daggett) is haunted by visions of Jason as a young boy, drowning in the lake. As the teenagers are murdered in brutal fashion, a storm also hits the *Lazarus*. Rennie, her boyfriend Sean (Reeves), a student boxer (Dupree), an English teacher (Bingham), Rennie’s stepfather (Richman), and her dog, Toby (Ace) are forced to abandon ship in a lifeboat.

They row to Manhattan, only to learn that the murderous Jason has followed them. He begins picking off the survivors as Sean and Rennie flee him in a subway, a diner, and finally, a sewer filled with toxic waste.

COMMENTARY: Forget Manhattan: The last *Friday the 13th* movie of the 1980s has been outsourced to Canada! *Jason Takes Manhattan* is a cut-rate production that's all hat and no cattle. The slasher bogeyman Jason Voorhees doesn't even reach Manhattan until near the climax, and when he does, it's really just Canada anyway.

Never has a *Friday the 13th* movie felt less cinematic and more like a TV movie than in this dreadful installment of the long-lived franchise. Even the horror gags are terrible, and poorly executed. When Jason cracks a Madonna wannabe with her electric guitar, for instance, the blood spatters onto the camera *before* the blow is even completed. How about a retake, director Rob Hedden?

In another sequence, Jason chokes a science student. There's no blood, no snapping bones, no gore whatsoever in this death. He just chokes her to death. Ho-hum. Methinks Jason's heart just isn't in this killing business anymore.

Finally, in a really terrible sequence in the cruise ship's "disco," a female victim dies because she has no attention span. That's right, she is killed because she can't keep her eyes on Jason from the moment he enters the room to the instant he steps right up to her and kills her. All she had to do was not look away from Jason once he got on the dance floor, but she does look away, and Jason now apparently possesses the capacity to bend time and space, materializing and de-materializing at will, growing ever closer to his prey. This was supposed to be a stylish moment, but it fails to convey anything but utter stupidity.

Jason masterfully folds time in other sequences too. Once in New York, Jason pulls a cop into an alley, but a second or two later is down a ways from that point—a full twenty feet or so ahead of a squad car—so he can be rammed by it. Again, he bi-locates during the wretched Mr. McCulloch death scene too. McCullough runs from Jason into a deserted building, but then gets thrown out a high window by Jason, who is miraculously already waiting inside.

Jason's actions and motives are also inexplicable. He pursues Rennie and Scott into a Manhattan diner. Yet he lets all the diners survive, and then continues to pursue the twosome. Why has this become so personal for Jason? Why let the diners survive? Was the director just too tired to provide the audience with the massacre that should have occurred?

The end of *Jason Takes Manhattan* is atrocious. For some reason, toxic waste is apparently routed through New York's sewers on a regular

basis in this movie's parallel universe. So Jason gets caught in the toxic soup and—wait for it—is transformed into a scrawny, teenage Jason wearing swimming drawers. His mask floats away in the muck.

Why did the toxic waste turn Jason into a kid? Where did the swimming drawers come from? Why is toxic waste in the sewers? How did Paramount's premier horror franchise go from the top-of-the-line to this produced-on-the-cheap wreck of a movie?

What a disgrace, and what a sad way for the iconic Jason to end the 1980s.

Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers

★ ★

Critical Reception

“[The director’s] scene composition features a lot of alternating light and dark spots, as though the scene is being viewed through the bars of a cell, and it’s impressive. And—especially in the early part of the film—he creates a couple of excellent suspense scenes, keeping the killer in the background and skillfully drawing out the terror potential.”—John Wooley, “*Halloween 5*,” *Tulsa World*, October 17, 1989, page C2.

“The dominant feature of *Halloween V* is the phenomenal ordeal of little Jamie, who is in terrified flight for the last half-hour of the film. Young Harris stumbles, shrieks, cries, pants, gasps, bleeds and suffers to a satirical extent and still delivers a splendid performance.”—Ted Mahar, “*Halloween V* Literary Trick Unfortunately Minus Treat,” *The Oregonian*, October 16, 1989, page D05.

“...in their formulaic roles of sexy, curious teenager ... Ellie Cornell and Wendy Kaplan toss off their lines with aplomb. Danielle Harris, as Jamie ... delivers a brave performance in which she must endure more soul-shattering seizures than Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*.”—Stephen Holden, “*Halloween 5* Offers Same Tricks, No Treats,” *Austin-American Statesman*, October 17, 1989, page D7.

“Boy, this film is determined to make every mistake it can. Change the Michael Myers mask. Brilliant. Get Ellie Cornell to return, playing the very likable character of Rachel from the prior film, and then kill her early in the first act (did the director think this would be some kind of homage to *Psycho*?). Have moments of truly odd and truly bad comic

relief inserted throughout. Totally change the Myers house. Had the director seen any of the prior films? Ugh. Among the worst sequels in recent memory (and not just to this series, either).”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Donald Pleasence (Dr. Sam Loomis); Danielle Harris (Jamie Lloyd); Ellie Cornell (Rachel Carruthers); Beau Starr (Sheriff Meeker); Jeffrey Landman (Billy); Tamara Glynn (Samantha); Jonathan Chapin (Mike); Matthew Walker (Spitz); Wendy Kaplan (Tina Williams); Betty Cavalho (Nurse); Troy Evans (Charlie); Frank Como (Deputy Nick); David Ursin (Deputy Tom); Harper Roisman (Mountain Man); Karen Alston (Stepmother); Max Robinson (Dr. Hart); Jack North (Gardener); Stanton Davis (Young Cop); Donald M. Shanks (Michael Myers).

CREW: Moustapha Akkad presents a Magnum Pictures Inc., production. *Casting:* Deedee Bradley. *Production Designer:* Brenton Swift. *Art Director:* Richard Honigman. *Special Makeup Effects Designed and created by:* K.N.B. Effects Group. *Stunt Coordinator:* Don Pike. *Music:* Alan Howarth. *Halloween Theme:* John Carpenter. *Line Producer:* Rick Nathanson. *Film Editor:* Charles Tetoni. *Director of Photography:* Robert Draper. *Written by:* Michael Jacobs, Domenique Othenin-Girard, Shem Bitterman. *Executive Producer:* Moustapha Akkad. *Producer:* Ramsey Thomas. *Directed by:* Domenique Othenin-Girard. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

INCANTATION: “They should ban Halloween in this town.”—A good suggestion goes unheeded in *Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers*.

SYNOPSIS: Michael Myers (Shanks), scourge of Haddonfield, Illinois, is not dead. He has survived an entire year after his purported demise and is returning to town to murder more innocent people. This time, Michael has a psychic link with his now-mute niece, Jamie (Harris), who is under the care of the obsessive Dr. Loomis (Pleasence) at the Haddonfield Children’s clinic.

Michael kills Jamie’s older sister, Rachel (Cornell), then pursues Rachel’s entire calling circle, including the ditzy Tina (Kaplan), the virginal Samantha (Glynn), and their two beaus, Mike (Chapin) and wiseacre Spitz (Walker).

Before the night is over, all four teens are dead, but Dr. Loomis believes he can use Jamie as the bait to capture Myers once and for all. He takes Jamie to the original Myers house and lures Michael

there, believing that Michael must face “the rage” where it all began, in his family home. Meanwhile, a black-garbed stranger in steel-tipped boots arrives in Haddonfield, his allegiance and agenda unknown.

COMMENTARY: The fifth installment of the long-lived *Halloween* franchise should not be subtitled *The Revenge of Michael Myers*, but rather *How to Insult Your Audience*. Everything the previous entry, 1988’s *Return of Michael Myers* got right, this film seems determined to get wrong, almost as though out of spite. Although *Halloween V* features some redeeming elements, particularly the bravura performance of Danielle Harris as terrorized little Jamie, there aren’t many.

In a great example of “I don’t care” continuity, *Halloween V* commences with the end of *Halloween IV*. Michael Myers fell into a well there, and here, in the film’s first moment, he escapes. Fine, that’s to be expected ... but his mask is totally different. Now, if the filmmakers didn’t care to use the same mask that *Part IV* employed, that is completely appropriate. However, the old mask should have been retained for the transitional sequences, to be replaced later in the film. Apparently, in what could be *Halloween V*’s refrain, that level of continuity was too much trouble.

Halloween IV ended with little Jamie taking on the evil Myers mantel, stabbing her mother with a big pair of scissors. In another “I don’t care” moment, *Halloween V* explains that she just injured her stepmother (who doesn’t appear in this sequel, by the way) and that Jamie is not evil, just mute.

Oh, okay.



Michael, is that you? The Shape returns in *Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers*, but his mask looks all wrong.

And remember how compelling *Halloween IV* was as it set up a very close personal relationship between little Jamie and her resourceful step-sister, Rachel, played by the fetching Ellie Cornell? In *Halloween V*, if you can believe it, Jamie's affection has shifted to a friend of Rachel's named Tina. Rachel is killed early in the film, but Jamie

grieves more when Tina dies later.

The hits keep coming in *Halloween V*. In regards to Rachel, the audience had formed a bond with this character in *Halloween IV*. Cornell's character is every bit as appealing, as human, as sympathetic (and frankly, as hot) as Jamie Lee Curtis's Laurie Strode. This kind of connection between actress and character, and then character and audience comes once in a blue moon. If you're lucky. Failing to understand this, *Halloween V* has Michael Myers kill Rachel off in the early going.

Quite frankly, the film never recovers from this loss. It's bad enough that *Halloween V* has Rachel acting totally out-of-character and hip-hopping half-naked around the house to bad pop music like a Valley Girl before obligingly jumping into the shower, but to kill her off so soon, and for no good reason is just insulting. This is a character who went toe-to-toe with Michael Myers in the previous installment. She fell off a roof, and wouldn't stop defending her sister. She gave the fight everything she had and proved to be a worthy opponent. *Halloween V* dispatches her without a look back, and doesn't even give her a noble death, protecting the sister she loves. It's a totally useless and aggravating demise for a great character.

What's the game plan here, you might ask? Why is *Halloween V* in such a rush to kill off likable characters that the audience identifies with? Well, to introduce a new stable of potential teen victims, of course, including Tina, Queen of the "I'm Never Sensible If I Can Help It" Ditz Balls. Then there's the charming (and balding) Spitz and the disreputable Mike, whose twin obsessions are his car and picking zits. This is the first *Halloween* film in which the characters have proven utterly unlikable, and I suspect that's because it's much easier to craft a film featuring assholes than to develop a character the audience cares about. Of course, *Halloween V* didn't even have to do that, it already had a character the audience cared about, if it cared to keep her alive. Name's Rachel. Carruthers.

Then, just when one believes *Halloween V* can't possibly sink any lower, it next introduces two stupid Haddonfield cops who banter comedically and even have their own ridiculous theme music ... played on a kazoo! It is utterly horrible. Even worse, there's a moment where one of these dorks says "Fortunately, we're lousy cops," and then the soundtrack honks!

Let's see, what else can *Halloween V* get wrong? Well, the Myers house is "reintroduced" in the film as an ornate Victorian mansion. This

utterly destroys the intention of the original film, which is, simply stated, that evil can sprout in modest middle America. You don't need a big haunted castle like Dracula's, one with bump-out windows and laundry chutes.

Then, even worse, a "mythology" is introduced around Michael Myers, including a Satanic symbol on his arm that indicates he's part of a cult! The film also introduces a "mysterious stranger" in black who, at the right moment, will free Michael from custody and end the film on a cliffhanger note.

My question to Domenique Othenin-Girard is simply this: Dude, had you ever seen a *Halloween* movie before directing one? Even if not, care could have been taken to make the film consistent with itself. For instance, in one scene Tina romantically discusses being with the person (Mike) who makes her heart feel like neon. She talks about being "connected" to that person. Later, in the farm scene, she indicates she could care less if Mike is there or not. So which it is? Come on, Tina, be sensible once. Or at least consistent.

Also, how many people believe that Haddonfield's police force (just decimated the previous Halloween, by the way) would permit Myers to sit in a holding cell with his mask still on? And in another charming bit of discontinuity, why is Michael in this film revealed to be "beautiful"? Didn't Laurie Strode shoot his eyes out in *Halloween II*? Wouldn't there at least be some scar tissue? And wasn't he also in a fire, like Loomis? Wouldn't there be some burns?

Given such blatant problems, how come *Halloween V* get two stars instead of a big fat raspberry? Well, it gets both, really. The last half hour of the film is a marked improvement over the first hour, in part because the cops, Tina, Spitz, and Mike are dead. With no stupid teen characters to turn to, the film appropriately returns to the place this saga began: with Donald Pleasence's Dr. Sam Loomis. Here, Pleasence has some wonderful, fascinating monologues about the nature of evil, and Michael in particular. "It will destroy you too. One Day. Michael," he calls out in the darkness to his nemesis. "This rage which drives you. You think if you kill them all it will go away. It won't."

Loomis even has a plan to capture him, and so the film finds some solid footing. After all the cardboard characters populating the film, it's practically jaw-dropping when actor Troy Evans appears as Officer Charlie and—in about five minutes—forges a totally believable character. He's stationed at the Myers house to protect Jamie while the others try to capture Michael, and Evans puts the teen cast of the

film to shame. He's kind, encouraging, and real in these scenes. True, he has terrible aim, but when he dies, the audience actually cares because the performer has connected on some level. He's like everybody's ideal Dad: friendly, responsible, competent, a protector.

The end of *Halloween V* takes off because it includes a limited setting (the Myers house), three characters the audience cares about (Loomis, Jamie and Charlie) and a terrifying threat, Michael Myers. It's back to horror basics. You don't need a mysterious steel-booted stranger, ritual symbols or a psychic link, just a compelling situation. Accordingly, the final chase and attack are forged with real skill. Michael lashes out at Loomis, leaving him free to hunt Jamie, and Danielle Harris—a kid, for chrissake—goes through the frickin' wringer. She's chased up and down stairs, forced to hide in a coffin, confronted with corpses and more. There's a terrifically tense scene in the laundry chute as she slides down to the basement, only to find the chute sealed and locked, trapping her. With Michael approaching, Jamie must scale the flat, seamless walls of the chute back up two stories. And outside, Myers is jabbing at the chute with his huge butcher knife.

I can't compliment Harris enough for her performance in this sequence. She hits no false notes, and demonstrates authentic terror so well I feared her blood vessels were going to explode. It's a remarkable performance in the service of a skillful chase scene in what is ultimately a very disappointing film.

You've got to feel for Pleasence, Cornell and Harris, who clearly gave their all in this movie but were ultimately helpless to save it from its own worst instincts. 1989 was the year Michael came home for the fifth time, and it was the year that the *Halloween* movie series officially jumped the shark. Like the *Friday the 13th* saga, the *Halloween* franchise ends the 1980s in disgrace and shame.

Now I need Dr. Loomis to counsel me about rage. Really. I hate to see a good thing get ruined.

CLOSE-UP: Final Girl Becomes First Victim: Even before she read the script for *Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers*, Ellie Cornell—who had played Rachel Carruthers to such dramatic effect (and audience popularity) in *Halloween IV*—had a sinking feeling.

"I knew what was coming," the actress notes. "I thought, 'You know what? She's not gonna last.' I was so proud—and I know Danielle was too—just to make it through one [*Halloween* movie]. It's so rare. And

it would be hard to top *Halloween IV*, no matter what. So when one of my agents called and said ‘They want you back to do Rachel again,’ I thought ... ‘I don’t know. Fat chance.’”

Cornell’s worst fears were confirmed when she read the script. “I really felt we had done something wonderful with *Halloween IV*, and you know you get in this mind-set that any sequel is going to be lesser than,” the actress says. “But anyway, they sent me the script—and I knew what was coming. I knew it was Rachel’s demise ... it’s just formula.

“But it was originally written in *Halloween V* to have Michael Myers shove scissors down Rachel’s throat,” Cornell reveals. “And I just thought ... ‘No.’ There was something visual there that I couldn’t grasp. So they re-wrote her death.”

Although Cornell agreed to appear in the film, the talent could see that the franchise had changed hands. “Dwight Little, who directed us in *Halloween IV*, was so paternal to Danielle and me, and he’s such a calm director. Domenique Othenin-Girard ... it was just a whole different take, and a whole different script altogether, and it was a whole different experience.”

Part of that experience included shooting a death scene. This was the first time that Cornell genuinely felt spooked by her proximity to Michael Myers. “The first time I was struck by the strangeness of it was in *Halloween V* doing the death scene, because it’s you and it’s him. Granted, there are some men under the bed pumping the blood bag and all that stuff, and you’re obviously in a room packed full of technicians, but there was something very eerie, and luckily we didn’t have to do too many takes. It was a technical mess, but there’s just something kind of strange about playing your first death scene, I think. The gentleman who played Michael Myers was a stuntman, and he was physically enormous. So he was just this enormous, enormous man, and that’s its own set of weirdness ... part of the nature of the beast.”

For this reviewer, *Halloween V* never recovers its footing after the death of Rachel Carruthers, a character audiences care deeply about. And it’s worse that others (including Jamie) don’t seem traumatized by it. The remainder of the film includes a mysterious stranger and comedic cops, and doesn’t really honor Rachel in any significant way, or even treat her character with respect.

“It was utterly useless,” Cornell notes of Rachel’s death. “I think the

thing for me as a moviegoer ... my sense is that the elements that really worked in *Halloween IV* involved the simplicity of it. It was a simple town, and a simple plot. These people were not complicated. They didn't have a lot of crazy stuff going on, and they just happened to meet this really scary guy.

"I think that's why Hitchcock is so good ... there's simplicity to it. We all understand the basics of why it would be scary for a flock of birds to come after you. It's not that convoluted. But by golly, the whole sense of it is so scary. The whole notion of Jamie Lee Curtis just being an innocent babysitter. What could be scarier? Not just a rabid killer ... but he's after you. You're the one he wants, and he's not going to stop until he kills you. And I felt like *Halloween V* was trying to do too much. It was just so spread out. You have no one to really root for."

"The innocence went out the door. It changed into something different," the actress concludes, "To *Halloween V*'s credit, I got to work with Greg Nicotero, who's one of the greats in the special effects field. That was really wonderful. That was my first body cast. My experience on both films—and I really credit Moustapha Akkad—not only did he keep a tight set, but it was respectful in every way possible. They took tremendous care of us. I felt very well-supported. I was never asked to do anything I wasn't supposed to. It was tasteful."

One thing horror fans hate is when a franchise can't remain faithful to previous installments, and expand on previous stories. Instead—and this happens commonly—a new director comes in with his own vision, and things go off in a new direction that doesn't always do credit to the series.

"Ironically, I went back two years ago when they celebrated the 25th anniversary of the *Halloween* series, and I went out to speak at Pasadena," Cornell relates, "and there was Moustapha Akkad, and they asked him, 'Why did you have Rachel Carruthers killed off in *Halloween V*?' And he said, 'If I had any inkling that she'd be so popular, I never would have done it.' They just got so caught up in the formula of it."

Still, that doesn't mean the fans, especially the male ones, have let go of a character they adored. "There have been people who have written me that say, 'I have three scripts that bring her back,'" Cornell notes with a laugh.

LEGACY: The twisted story of Michael Myers picked up in the 1990s, six years after *Halloween V*, with *The Curse of Michael Myers* (1996). It

was so confusing and bizarre a film that *Halloween IV*, *Halloween V* and *Halloween VI* were written out of existence for *H20* in 1998.

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer



Critical Reception

“McNaughton’s film is among the most disturbing pictures ever made. With a dispassionate tone and with graphic but controlled violence, it shows and studies the horrendous cruelties of Henry ... with no answer provided, no absolution offered, and no release.”—Stephen Prince, *History of the American Cinema 10: A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980–1989*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000, page 302.

“*Henry* was without a doubt the antidote to a species of film that had been seemingly forever poisoned by the likes of Freddy Krueger and his endless stream of sarcasm and one-liners. *Henry* reminded audiences, once again, that not only could horror films be bleak and oppressive, but when at the top of their game, probably should be. 1980s horror cinema became all too ‘family friendly,’ and John Naughton’s loose portrayal of real-life killer Henry Lee Lucas is the shot in the arm that the genre so desperately needed. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* is not pretty, but then horror was never meant to be pretty.”—Christopher Wayne Curry, co-author of *A Taste of Blood: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis*, Creation Books, 1998.

“A film that’s so good it’s difficult to watch. Michael Rooker is very easy to like, except he’s a serial killer. He hunts his prey, except when he’s in the mood for something more random. Director John McNaughton hits this one way out of the park on a low budget, with a production literally thrown together, that captures the frightening nature of city streets in almost documentary-like fashion. Rooker is amazingly successful in this part, and rightfully made himself a career in Hollywood as a result.”—William Latham, author of *Mary’s Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Rooker (Henry); Tom Towles (Otis); Tracy Arnold (Becky); Mary Demas (Dead Woman); Anne Bartoletti (Waitress); Denise Sullivan (Floating Woman); Elizabeth Kaden, Ted Kaden (Dead Couple); Monica Anne O’Malley (Mall Victim); Bruce Quist (Husband);

David Katz (Henry's Boss); Kurt Nuebig (High School Jock); Ray Atherton (Fence); Lisa Temple, Brian Graham, Sean Oves (Murdered Family); Pamela Fox (Hair Stylist).

CREW: Marjack Productions Inc. presents a John McNaughton film. *Art Director:* Rick Paul. *Costume Designer:* Patricia Hart. *Music:* Robert McNaughton, Ken Hale, Steven A. Jones. *Casting:* Jeffrey Lyle Segal. *Special Effects:* Jeffrey Lyle Segal. *Film Editor:* Elena Maganini. *Director of Photography:* Charlie Lieberman. *Executive Producers:* Walead B. Ali, Malik B. Ali. *Written by:* Richard Fire, John McNaughton. *Produced by:* John McNaughton, Lisa Dedmond, Steven A. Jones. *Directed by:* John McNaughton. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young woman named Becky (Arnold) leaves behind her bad marriage and moves to Chicago to live with her low-life brother, Otis (Towles) and his quiet, intense roommate, Henry (Rooker), a fellow who just happens to be a brutal serial killer, and even reputedly killed his own mother. Becky is hoping to bring her young daughter to town, and gets a job working at a beauty salon.

Meanwhile, Henry recruits Otis into his killings. The duo murders a sarcastic TV repairman and steal a camcorder, shoot dead a good Samaritan and even videotape their torture and murder of an innocent, randomly picked suburban family. Becky grows close to Henry emotionally, unable to see what a monster he is, and Henry begins to feel protective of her. This complicates his relationship with Otis, since Otis is contemplating raping Becky. Otis and Henry come to blows over Otis's attempts at incest, leaving Becky to choose whether to be with Henry or defend her brother. Her choice has fatal consequences.

COMMENTARY: Sometimes a shock to the system—a *Last House on the Left* (1972), a *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), even a *Blair Witch Project* (1999)—is precisely what the doctor ordered for an ailing horror genre. Arriving at the end of the 1980s, after years of rubber reality special effects sequences, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* is that rare wake-up call: a spare and uncompromising effort of kitchen sink authenticity; a film that views an apathetic killer, a “new sickness for our time,” according to the film’s director, in unflinching, but also non-judgmental terms.

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer debuted at the Telluride Film Festival and one-third of the audience walked out of the screening, a statistic that indicates just how powerful, raw and disturbing John McNaughton’s effort, shot in the style of “an art film,” really is. It

concerns a low-key, blue-collar monster named Henry Lee Lucas, played with strangely somnolent, internal rage by Michael Rooker. Henry is a man who commits murder, games the system (by constantly changing his *m.o.* so the police won't catch him), and looks upon any life other than his own as worthless. Any person unlucky enough to be drawn into his orbit will suffer, including those who might risk loving him, like the unfortunate Becky, the perfect victim.

Unlike the special effects spectaculars dominating cinemas in the 1980s, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* returns the horror genre back to what it was becoming in the more artistic 1970s: personal, apocalyptic, daring, and intently questioning of our moral values and society. Critics agreed that *Henry* was a high watermark, and it made the "ten best" of the year list from *Time Magazine*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Washington Post*. It is a film that is recognized immediately as being so forceful, uncompromising, and appropriate to the time—not to mention rare—that its power can't be denied.

Shot in Autumn 1985 on a budget of one hundred thousand dollars with a crew of just three-to-five people, it derives much of its effectiveness from McNaughton's decision to shoot it like a kitchen-sink drama. The approach is *cinéma vérité*, meaning the film seeks to represent or dramatize life as it is unfolding, rather than recording something that has "already happened" and thus is easily distanced. This approach fosters immediacy, and yet McNaughton artistically tempers the audience's proximity to these unsavory *dramatis personae* with a degree of decorum and restraint.

For instance, despite the *cinéma vérité* look at Henry's life, the film does not seek—at first—to bludgeon viewers with his evil acts. Instead, it opens with images of a nude corpse left behind in the woods. The corpse is that of a once-beautiful woman, and a slow pull-back reveals her body. This perspective is inter-cut with scenes of Henry driving his car, going about his business, and the connection is forged between victim and killer. However, and quite importantly, McNaughton hasn't yet shown Henry committing murder.

Later, Henry has used his job as an exterminator to wheedle his way into the home of a woman he has been stalking. Again, the attack isn't actually witnessed.

And that's because, simply put, McNaughton is more interested in examining Lucas's psychology at home, when he isn't killing. He's part of a family unit that consists of uneducated, broken, truly messed-up individuals. Becky was abused by her father as a teenager, but feels

that he had a right to screw around with her. Otis is an imbecile, and Henry, we learn, considers his mother a whore and claims to have murdered her with a baseball bat. Both he and Otis have spent time in prison for their misdeeds and operate, unnoticed, on the periphery of society. By featuring these characters in their own natural environment, the very home they made for themselves, McNaughton has the chance to observe them. Quite simply, they are people for whom right and wrong simply isn't on the radar. That's too complicated. "It's either you or them," Henry tells Otis, and that explains his philosophy perfectly.

Later in the film, Otis and Henry want a TV set (because Otis kicked in the one he had) and kill a salesman for a camcorder and a boob tube. Here, the violence is seen on screen. They kill their victim with a soldering iron, by stabbing him multiple times, and then by smashing a fifty dollar TV on his head and plugging it in. This scene is almost over-the-top violent, and not particularly realistic, in part, one suspects, to satirize the horror genre itself. This is how killers are often depicted, in silly set pieces with explosions and gore.

So when the movie reaches its pinnacle with a thoroughly upsetting and revolting murder, the audience simply isn't prepared. Henry and Otis go out "hunting" and kill a randomly chosen suburban family. Dad gets tied up, they rape Mom and break the son's neck. Then Otis breaks Mom's neck for good measure, and after she's already dead begins kissing and fondling her body. This is horrific on its own, but the film ends with the revelation that Otis and Henry have been watching this all on television: They used the camcorder to tape their exploits and are now at home reliving and enjoy them, drinking beers and having a grand old time. Otis even rewinds it. "I want to see it again."

The impact of this scene is hard to overstate. It chills the blood. It's tempting to look at Otis or Henry as "monsters," as a separate breed, filled with blood lust, hatred and alien urges. But they're not. They're human beings, and the scary thing is that there's a part of every person that relates to this leering assertion of lethal force.

Another harrowing, totally unprovoked killing occurs under a bridge. Henry and Otis just want to feel the thrill of killing, so they stage a breakdown with their car and wait for a Good Samaritan to stop and help. When he does, Otis shoots him three times in cold blood. There's no rhyme or reason to this, these men are simply acting out impulses. Perhaps just hoping to feel *something* in a world where they feel they've been given a raw deal. In their world, no good deed goes unpunished and they show no remorse for killing an innocent, good-hearted person. It's him, or them.

Eventually, Henry turns on Otis too, in a bloody, harrowing scene. He cuts off his head in the bathtub and puts it in a garbage bag. His best friend is now nothing but trash. Becky meets the same fate. She's in love with him and he tells her they'll go stay with her sister, but, of course, he's a sociopath. On the radio during the penultimate scene with Becky and Henry, a song with the lyrics "My Mistake Was Loving You" is heard under the dialogue. This was indeed Becky's mistake. She has fallen for a man with no conscience, no remorse, no ability to love anyone in the deep sense of that word. He cares only about himself, no one else.

Becky ends the film stashed in a suitcase. Henry has moved on to the next hunting ground.

The reason that *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* works is that John McNaughton, while taking pains to make it feel loose, improvised and "real," also views all the miserable happenings with a level of clinical detachment, as though he's examining gorillas in the wild. His directing style is straight-faced and thoughtful, but he also keeps his distance when some of this material is just too strong to take. Even a passing view of Henry, a glance at a man with a dark heart, is more than enough.

And the scariest thing, of course, is that there are people out there just like him.

LEGACY: Thanks in part to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, the 1990s became the decade of the serial killer in the horror cinema. A sequel

to *Henry*, subtitled *The Mask of Sanity*, followed in 1998, and starred Neil Giuntoli as Henry Lee Lucas. Chuck Parello directed. John McNaughton in 1991 directed *The Borrower*, another, more traditional horror flick about an alien who wears human heads.

The Horror Show

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Det. Lucas McCarthy); Brion James (Max Jenke); Rita Taggart (Donna); Dedee Pfeiffer(Bonnie); Aron Eisenberg (Scott McCarthy); Thom Bray (Peter Campbell); Matt Clark (Dr. Tower); Terry Alexander (Casey); Lewis Arquette (Hank); Alvy Moore (Texas Chili Salesman); Lawrence Tierney (Warden).

CREW: United Artsits Presents a Sean S. Cunningham Production, a James Isaac Film. *Casting:* Melissa Skoff. *Film Editor:* Anton Edward. *Design Consultant:* Stewart Campbell. *Special Makeup and Effects:* KNB Effects. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Produced by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *Written by:* Alan Smithee, Leslie Bohem. *Directed by:* James Isaac. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: “That just gave me a hard on!”—Bogeyman Max Jenke, as the electric chair fires, in *The Horror Show*.

SYNOPSIS: A cop and family man, Lucas McCarthy (Henriksen) lives in terror of the serial killer he captured, the villainous Max Jenke (James), and plans to see him executed so he can stop experiencing nightmares. However, the electric chair procedure goes horribly wrong, and only after administering increased voltage does the State succeed in terminating the mass murderer.

After the execution, Professor Campbell (Bray), who is conducting research in “electrical impulses” and “power surges,” comes to believe that Jenke has resurrected himself as a powerful ghost who can reshape reality to his liking. This theory is correct, and Jenke begins to haunt Lucas’s family, including his daughter, Bonnie (Pfeiffer), his son, Scott (Eisenberg) and his wife, Donna (Taggart). Jenke visits Lucas, making him appear delusional and dangerous, and then murders Bonnie’s boyfriend Vinnie and pins the crime on McCarthy. With Lucas incarcerated, he has no way to save his family from Jenke’s vengeance. Before he dies at Jenke’s hands, Professor

Campbell explains that electricity is the key to killing the madman.

COMMENTARY: *The Horror Show* (known in foreign release as *House III*) is one of those horror movies where the missed potential just cannot escape notice. This is a film that stars two genre giants, Lance Henriksen and Brion James, and which features good direction and special effects. Director Isaac maintains a tight frame, enhances the film with moody lighting, and Harry Manfredini provides a bloody good score. And yet, the film fails to achieve success because it is undone by its rubber reality template.

More than anything, *The Horror Show* apparently wanted to provide the world another Freddy Krueger. *Fangoria* magazine even provided a cover shot of Max Jenke and a caption that indicated he might unseat the reigning rubber reality champ. Unfortunately, the slavish desire to re-do the world of Freddy saddles *The Horror Show* with a very derivative feeling.

For instance, Max Jenke's hideout is an electric plant which—of course—is a not-so-distant cousin to Freddy's favorite haunt, the boiler room. And remember how in the later *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, there was “Freddy’s girl,” that creepy youngster who dances around with a jump rope, sings Freddy’s nursery rhyme and wears a little white dress? In *The Horror Show*, Max Jenke also has a “child,” a girl who sings a nursery rhyme and wears the white dress. True, she doesn’t jump rope, but the model is all too obvious.

Another reason *The Horror Show* doesn’t work is that it’s very similar to Wes Craven’s opus of the same year, *Shocker*. Who can tell which movie came first, but both efforts involve horrible serial killers who are executed in the electric chair and then use electricity as a means of re-shaping the world to their liking. Again, the feeling of a derivative film is impossible to escape.

Yet there are many derivative horror films which nonetheless have succeeded because of style, performance, even a clever spin on familiar material (like post-modern humor). Where *The Horror Show* ultimately falls apart is in its depiction of a rubber-reality world where the rules are not clear.

In the rubber-reality template, an evil killer is able to affect our consensus reality, often in dreams. In *The Horror Show*, Jenke is somehow able to makes others participate in strange waking phantasms. If he has indeed altered the world, then the terrible things that appear to happen in the film do indeed happen. He really does

rape Lucas's daughter. He really does murder Vinnie and the family cat, Cosmo (who is around to provide that favorite horror cliché, the cat jump). Yet at the end of the film, young daughter McCarthy is not pregnant, and the cat is found alive (even though his corpse was seen in one of Jenke's rubber reality interludes). So, did these characters really undergo such terrors, or were they mere delusions? If they were delusions, then why aren't Jenke's other victims—namely Vinnie and Professor Campbell—also restored to reality healthy and fine at the end?

The problem is, again, there are no consistent rules in *The Horror Show*. Electricity is the thing that makes Max Jenke immortal, and yet is also the thing that can bring him back to our reality and make him vulnerable to bullets? That makes very little logical sense, but that's precisely what the movie wants audiences to understand. Electrocute Max Jenke once and he's a powerhouse; give him a second jolt, he's cannon fodder! Why?

In fact, *The Horror Show* poops its own rules in the early sequences. Jenke is given one jolt of electricity and doesn't die, so he's given a second to kill him off. By the movie's own (flawed) sense of internal logic, he should have died at the second administration of high voltage, no?

Also, if Max Jenke is shaping the reality of the McCarthys around him, and is aware that electricity is now his Achilles heel (after delivering him from death), why does he re-shape Lucas's reality to include his electricity plant headquarters, where he can be easily given the required voltage to make him mortal again?

Perhaps even more pertinently, how is that Max Jenke returns to the world in a corporeal form, when his real body—the one that was electrocuted—is scarred and presumably buried? So is there a second Max Jenke body lying around somewhere? Imagine the case study on this that some enterprising researcher could initiate! A serial killer dies, leaving behind his body, travels into a nether realm and becomes a rubber-reality god because of the electric chair, but then returns to this reality replete with a second body! It's the spontaneous creation of matter!

My final complaint is simply that the title is wrong for this material. There is one brief sequence wherein Max Jenke appears on the TV during a program called Death-a-thon. There, he cracks jokes like "Take my wife ... and disembowel her, please." Is that *The Horror Show* of the title? Based on that one, paltry, short sequence? There's

also a scene of a turkey dinner coming to life, so the movie could have also been just as validly titled *Serial Turkey*, or *Thanksgiving Day*, or something like that. *The Horror Show* needed a better, more expressive title.

But—oh, I forgot—*Shocker* was already taken.

I, Madman



Cast and Crew

CAST: Jenny Wright (Virginia); Clayton Rohner (Richard); Randall William Cook (Malcolm Brand); Stephanie Hodge (Mona); Michelle Jordan (Colette); Vance Valencia (Sgt. Navarro); Mary Baldwin (Librarian); Rafael Nazario (Hotel Clerk); Bob Frank (Hotel Manager); Bruce Wagner (Pianist); Kevin Bast (Black Actor); Steven Memel (Lenny); Vincent Lucchesi (Lt. Garber); Murray Rubin (Sidney Zeit); Tom Badal (Composite Artist); Robert La Page (Acting Teacher); Nelson Welch (Elderly Customer); James Quinay Hendrick (Bus Driver); Jeff Yesko (Patrolman); Mary Pat Gleason (Policeman); David P. Lewis (Officer); Christopher Kries (Sergeant); Marty Levy (Detective Fisk); Stan Roth (Forensics Expert).

CREW: Trans World Entertainment Presents a Sarlui/Diamant Production of a Tibor Takacs Film. *Casting:* Ed Mitchell, Robert Litvak. *Music:* Michael Hoenig. *Associate Producer:* Patti Meade. *Special Effects Created by:* Randall William Cook. *Unit Production Manager:* Bob Manning. *First Assistant Director:* Roger La Page. *Second Assistant Director:* Steve Cohen. *Production Design:* Ron Wilson, Matthew Jacob. *Director of Photography:* Bryan England. *Film Editor:* Marcus Manton. *Executive Producers:* Paul Mason, Helen Sarlui-Tucker. *Written by:* David Chaskin. *Produced by:* Rafael Eisenman. *Directed by:* Tibor Takacs. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “It makes Stephen King read like Mother Goose, but it’s passionate...”—A reader describes the literary flair of the mysterious Malcolm Brand in *I, Madman*.

SYNOPSIS: Aspiring actress and book store clerk Virginia (Wright) grows increasingly obsessed with the literary works of obscure (but passionate) author Malcolm Brand (Cook), who published just two books before disappearing: *Much of Madness*, *More of Sin*, and the hard-to-find *I, Madman*.

After reading her copy of *I, Madman*, Virginia begins to see a character from the book stalking her, a love-mad doctor without a face. This is Malcolm, and he is bent on surgically removing the features of Virginia's closest friends in order to make himself beautiful for her. Virginia knows where this is going: At the end of the book, Malcolm cuts out the heart of his intended lover, and Virginia will surely suffer the same fate. The only problem is that the police, including her boyfriend Richard (Rohner) find it difficult to believe her story that a character from a book has come to life.

Virginia reads *I, Madman* closely in an attempt to ferret out who Malcolm's next victim may be, but he tricks her and kills Mona (Hodge), Virginia's friend at a bookstore. Virginia races to the bookstore too late to save Mona, and Malcolm stalks her. But Virginia remembers a character from *Much of Madness, More of Sin*, a half-jackal monster that hates Malcolm. And if Malcolm is real, maybe that beast is as well.

COMMENTARY: Yes, Virginia, there is a Madman. *I, Madman* is a well-made, intriguing and intelligently crafted rubber-reality horror that focuses on the world of literature, or more accurately, the world of one particular book (entitled *I, Madman*) brought to terrifying life. The movie confidently captures the feeling we garner from reading a good book ourselves: it is immersing, an obsession, even reality-altering to the reader (and in this case, the viewer).

In the 1980s, audiences were treated to visions of the dream dimension in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, views of Hell in *Hellraiser* and *Hellbound*, and visits to supernatural worlds in rubber reality efforts such as *House* (1985), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) and beyond. *I, Madman* presages such 1990s-era, Pirandello-esque ventures as Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* (1994) and *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995) by spotlighting a literary spin on this commonly used horror template. In this film, the very act of reading a book brings its literary characters to life (hence the rubber reality), particularly the scary boogeyman, Malcolm Brand. Worse, this lunatic, who is skinning and scalping his victims so as to prove acceptable in appearance to his romantic interest, has cast the reader—in this case, Virginia—as his star-crossed lover.

Even the conclusion logically adheres to the rubber reality organizing principle dominating the film (a book made real) by bringing to life *another* character from Brand's literature, a terrible jackal creature. This monster is scary too, and yet it literalizes the idea of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” and dutifully takes out Brand, thus

unwittingly saving Virginia from further torment.

Any horror movie that trades on the allures of good books has a leg up, as far as this critic is concerned, but *I, Madman* is successful because it knows how to scare the audience. In one chase sequence that raises the hair on the back of the neck, Brand pursues a redhead female, described in voice-over narration from his novel as “a flaming, crimson torch of feathers, ready and ripe for easy picking.” He follows her up a staircase and jabs her with a needle as she reaches her apartment. The scene consists of an *Evil Dead*-inspired zoom, and then Malcolm’s deep bass voice puncturing the dark and silence as the woman becomes trapped in her bathroom. The scene’s frightening conclusion finds Brand brandishing a straight razor and taking it to the victim’s scalp. Unlike Freddy at this point, Brand is still a ghoul with the capacity to scare, not a circus-master given to ludicrous and comical taunts.

Another frightening scene finds Brand after the piano man across the way. Blood gets squirted on the ivories as Brand hacks up the piano man with a scalpel, taking his ears.

A little bit of Freddy, a little piece of *Phantom of the Opera* and a little juice of its own grants *I, Madman* plenty of appeal for the horror faithful. The film also evidences a funny sense of humor, particularly in its observations about the publishing business, especially in a scene set at a porno publishing house (which has released “adult” books with literary-sounding titles like *Moby’s Dick* and *East of Edith*).

The leads in the film, Jenny Wright and Clayton Rohner, prove likeable, and the audience comes to care and identify with them in a way that wouldn’t be possible if these were cardboard teenagers wearing victim signboards. The audience indeed fears for their safety, since Brand has promised to wed Virginia, thus figuratively and literally taking her heart “one way or another.”

One of *I, Madman*’s greatest assets is its carefully hewn, overriding texture of inevitability. The book is completed, after all, and the action depicted on-screen is faithful to what Malcolm has penned, years earlier. Each gory on-screen murder happens precisely the way he described it in the text, and a sting to catch him in the library goes wrong when Virginia misinterprets his words. Given this sense of inescapable fate snowballing along, the final act—set in a used book store, appropriately enough—garners real chills and tension. Some may see the just-in-the-nick-of-time materialization of the monster jackal as a *deus ex machina*, but isn’t that the point?

It's a literary device after all, and this is a horror movie based on the world of literature.

Intruder

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Elizabeth Cox (Jennifer Ross); Renee Estevez (Linda); Danny Hicks (Bill); David Byrnes (Craig); Sam Raimi (Randy the Butcher); Eugene Glazer (Danny); Billy Marti (Dave); Burr Steers (Bub); Ted Raimi (Produce Joe); Craig Stark (Tim); Alvy Moore (Officer Dalton); Tom Lester (Officer Matthews); Emil Sitka (Mr. Abernathy); Bruce Campbell (Officer Howard); Lawrence Bender (Officer Adams); Scott Spiegel (Bread Man); Greg Nicotero (Townie in Car).

CREW: *Presented by:* Phantom Productions. *Production Design:* Wendy Guidery. *Special Makeup Effects:* Greg Nicotero, Robert Kurtzman, Howard Berger. *Film Editor:* King Wilder. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Jonathan Scott Bogner. *Co-Producer:* Douglas Hessler. *Director of Photography:* Fernando Arguelles. *Story:* Scott Spiegel, Lawrence Bender. *Producer:* Lawrence Bender. *Written and Directed by:* Scott Spiegel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Don’t you see? I’m just *crazy* about this store!”—The killer explains his motivation in *Intruder*.

SYNOPSIS: Late at night, just as the Walnut Lake Market is getting ready to close for the evening, the cashier’s violent ex-boyfriend Craig (Byrnes) attacks her. Jennifer (Cox) survives, but Craig goes on a rampage and disappears into the bowels of the grocery store, until captured and tossed out. After the excitement, Bill (Hicks) reveals the bad news that the grocery store is being forced to close permanently, and that the employees will all lose their jobs. The disappointed employees stay late to conduct one last inventory and cut prices of all remaining stock, unaware that a killer is on the premises, dedicated to murdering each and every one of them.

COMMENTARY: “Clean up on aisle one” takes on new meaning in *Intruder*. The film’s locale, an isolated grocery store at closing time, is a terrific set-up for a horror movie, and in terms of the slasher film paradigm, the grocery store offers the filmmakers a near-perfect organizing principle. You’ve got your young victims (grocery store employees, particularly attractive cashiers), you’ve got inventive ways

to kill people, provided by the various food departments (meat, produce, etc.), and the store itself makes for some fine, eerie visuals. An early high-angle shot, for instance, reveals the breadth of this unique killing field: long, isolated aisles, stacked high with food products and the like, and essentially serving as hiding places and barriers to sight.

On top of that, *Intruder* offers the unequaled pleasure of offering the Raimi brothers—Sam and Ted—as choice cuts, unsuspecting victims of the psychotic killer. Slightly less nutty here than in *Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except*, Sam plays the store’s butcher, Randy. He is murdered in gruesome fashion, hanged—by his face—on a meat hook.

Ted doesn’t fare much better. As the produce guy, he gets a butcher knife to the skull. After Raimi the Younger dies, the film amusingly cuts to a sign which reads: *Safety First. Knives are sharp.*

Actually, *Intruder* boasts a pretty good sense of humor overall. Some of the camera angles are downright wacky, including one looking up from inside the “rotary” portion of an old rotary phone. Also, the fisticuffs are frequently filmed from a first-person angle, as though we’re the combatants ourselves. The sound-effects during these fights are ridiculous and exaggerated “movie” sounds, like thuds and cracking bones. If you like campy humor, you won’t be disappointed by the film’s wit or inventive visual style.

Finally, *Evil Dead* star Bruce Campbell shows up as a misguided cop in the film’s last two minutes, and—as is par for the course for the guy—sizes up the situation completely wrong and goes after the wrong people. “Useless authority” and all, only with a bigger chin this time.

In toto, *Intruder* boasts tons of low-budget energy, and one senses a tongue is lodged safely in cheek somewhere behind-the-scenes. Still, it isn’t like this is a genre high watermark, because *Intruder* adds precious little that is new to the slasher formula and relies on such tropes as the red herring. Furthermore, the killer’s motivation for going after the store’s employees is utterly ridiculous. Still, at this late date in the decade, one could nonetheless find comfort in the fact that the movie understands and seems to relish how completely ridiculous the form had become. *Cutting Class* also attempted to inject some self-reflexive, knowing campy humor into the slasher paradigm, but *Intruder* has a better go at it. Which doesn’t mean it doesn’t have gore and jolts, too. Eyeballs end up in olive jars, and a severed hand turns up in a lobster tank. And the sting in the tale/tail, which occurs in a phone booth ostensibly post-massacre, hits the viewer fiercely.

Now if only the killer had asked “paper or plastic” and proceeded to strangle the final girl, the movie would have really been on to something.

Leviathan

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“...a rip-off of *Alien* and its sequel *Aliens*. Only this is no nice, grungy little low-budget rip-off, where insouciance and renegade filmmaking techniques take the place of slick big-budget decorum...; this is a large-scale major-studio production that seems to luxuriate in its capacity to replicate in slavish detail virtually every component of its forebearers.”—“*Leviathan* a Whale of a Bore,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1989, page D3.

“The monster ... is impressive, some suspense is generated for a time near the end, and there are flashes of creepy atmosphere, especially in the scenes in the wrecked Russian ship. But when the makers of *Leviathan* decided to do an underwater knock-off of *Alien*, they should have remembered to copy the excitement along with the plot.”—John Wooley, “*Leviathan*,” *Tulsa World*, March 19, 1989, page H2.

“This movie gets the most damning of criticisms—I watched it and can’t remember a thing about it.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Weller (Beck); Richard Crenna (Doctor Glen Thompson/”Doc”); Amanda Pays (Williams/”Willie”); Daniel Stern (Six Pack); Ernie Hudson (Jones); Michael Carmine (De Jesus); Meg Foster (Martin); Lisa Eilbacher (Bowman); Hector Elizondo (Cobb); Eugene Lipinsky (Russian Ship Captain); Larry Dolgin (Helicopter Pilot).

CREW: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Luigi and Aurelio De Laurentiis present a Gordon Company Production, a film by George P. Cosmatos. *Casting:* Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Lynda Gordon. *Costume Design:* April Ferry. *Creature Effects Produced by:* Stan Winston. *Mechanical Special Effects by:* Nick Allder. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Film Editors:* Robert Silvi, John F. Burnett. *Production Designer:* Ron Cobb. *Director of Photography:* Alex Thomson, *Executive Producers:* Lawrence &

Charles Gordon. *Screenplay by*: David Peoples, Jeb Stuart. *Story*: David Peoples. *Produced by*: Luigi and Aurelio De Laurentiis. *Directed by*: George P. Cosmatos. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: When a deep sea miner nicknamed “Six Pack” (Stern) working for Tri-Oceanic Corporation stumbles over the south ridge of Shack #7, his home base, he discovers a sunken Russian freighter, the *Leviathan*.

He and another miner, Willie (Pays), an astronaut candidate, explore the rusted craft and bring back items including the medical files of the deceased crew and a flask of vodka, which Six Pack and Bowman (Eilbacher) share in his bunk.

The *Leviathan*’s video captain’s log reveals that the crew was stricken with a strange disease that first resembled a “tropical infection.” Before long, Bowman and Six Pack are suffering from this very illness, and Shack #7’s Dr. Thompson (Crenna) realizes that something is altering their genetic structure.

The leader of Shack #7, Beck (Weller) orders an evacuation, but his corporate boss Martin (Foster) warns that a hurricane is fowling rescue attempts and that the crew will have to sit tight. Six Pack appears to die, but in fact he becomes a genetic mutation, a deep sea-human hybrid that has absorbed Six Pack’s memories but has a desire only to kill. The beast runs rampant through the crew, killing De Jesus (Carmine), the shop steward Cobb (Elizondo), and leaving only Jones (Hudson), Willie and Beck with a plan for escape.

Realizing that the *Leviathan* infection cannot be allowed to spread to the civilized world, Doc ejects the escape bubbles from Shack #7, stranding the surviving crew members. And then, before long, comes news of an impending implosion.

COMMENTARY: Hey babe, didn’t you hear? Underwater is the new outer space...

It’s *Deep Star Six* all over again, only with a considerably higher budget, in the third beneath-the-sea monster movie of 1989, the dedicated *Alien* rip-off *Leviathan*. Yet another interracial crew, this one led by Peter Weller instead of Greg Evigan, battles another sea monster, this one the product of genetic experimentation, and ends up scuttling a state-of-the-art corporate undersea mining facility. There’s the *de rigueur* blue collar banter among the diverse crew (and talk of unions and the stock market), the traitor crew member stereotype

(like *Aliens'* Burke) and the baffled doctor attempting to cope with a new and dangerous life form. And, as was the case in Ridley Scott's original *Alien*, there's a distant but evil corporation—concerned only with profit—manipulating events behind the scenes. Meg Foster puts a memorable yuppie face on this cliché, and the movie ends with the satisfying scene in which Peter Weller knocks her out with a well-placed punch. Die, yuppie scum.

Leviathan also highlights the inevitable ticking clock countdown to destruction, the pre-crisis accident that doesn't seem connected to the main threat (in *Deep Star Six*, it was a porthole closing on the captain), the isolated setting (a facility 16,000 feet beneath the surface), and the final sting in the tail/tale. Like *The Abyss*, *Leviathan* posits a “storm” on the surface above while terror reigns below, but here the hurricane is a red herring.

Leviathan is a glitzy, slick Hollywood monster film and very enjoyable on that level. Unlike many horrors of the decade, it isn't difficult to watch or stay engaged with, and the special effects were good for their day. Today, the monster looks a bit rubbery, and it's easy to detect that the underwater scenes weren't actually filmed in the sea, but rather on a sound stage with merely a blue light filter providing the suggestion of water. The costumes, sets, computer read-outs and technobabble are all impressive too, if a hair on the plastic side. Ultimately, this movie boasts less energy and zip than *Deep Star Six*, which knew that it was just a stupid monster movie and had fun with the premise.

It's only natural, perhaps, given *Leviathan*'s derivative nature that it ends with an homage to another classic of this type, John Carpenter's *The Thing*. Remember how Kurt Russell's MacReady blew up the Thing with the quip “Well, fuck you too” and some well-placed explosives? Here, Peter Weller lobs a flare into the monster's gaping mouth and says “Say ah, motherfucker.”

Lisa

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Cheryl Ladd (Katherine); D.W. Moffett (Richard); Staci Keanan (Lisa); Tanya Fenmore (Wendy Marks); Jeffrey Tambor (Mr. Marks); Edan Gross (Ralph); Julie Cobb (Mrs. Marks); Michel Ayr (Scott); Lisa

Moncure (Sarah); Tom Dugan (Mr. Adams); Frankie Thorn (Judy); John Hawke (Mr. Howard); Drew Pillsbury (Don); Tom Burke (Maitre d'); Tom Nolan (Waiter); Hildy Brooks (Allison's Landlady).

CREW: A Frank Yablans Production, a film by Gary Sherman. *Casting:* Michael Chinich. *Special Effects:* Guy Faria. *Stunt Coordinator:* Ben Scott. *Music:* Joe Renzetti. *Film Editor:* Ross Albert. *Production Design:* Patricia Van Ryker. *Cinematography:* Alex Nepomniashchy. *Associate Producers:* Lucas Foster, Ronald B. Colby. *Written by:* Gary Sherman, Karen Clark. *Produced by:* Frank Yablans. *Directed by:* Gary Sherman. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Lisa (Keanan) is a precocious fourteen-year-old who lives with her overprotective mother Katherine (Ladd) and who loves to play pranks on strangers, particularly the attractive men she runs into. She likes to snap photographs and keep them in a scrapbook of future “lovers.” One such target is the mysterious Richard (Moffet), an odd bird. Lisa begins calling him, pretending to be a romantic interest. Lisa is unaware that her new “flame” is actually the deadly “Candlelight Killer,” a serial murderer already responsible for the deaths of seven single women. Richard traces her to her home, and mistakes the beautiful divorcee Katherine for the woman who has been pursuing him.

COMMENTARY: Movies such as *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1989) and Gary Sherman’s *Lisa* (1989) indicate the ascent of a new monster in the horror genre and the American cinema, one who would—by the mid-1990s—grow to be more popular than vampires, faceless slashers, dream demons and werewolves: the serial killer.

After a decade in which murderers killed with machetes, had laughable, psychologically facile motives for their crimes, and no real human identity, audiences apparently began to hunger for the old Norman Bates model. This new brand of killers, like Hannibal Lecter (*The Silence of the Lambs* [1991]), Catherine Trammell (*Basic Instinct* [1992]) and the like needed to be human individuals, ones armored with personalities, histories and a “reality” to their madness that an unkillable man donning a hockey mask simply couldn’t provide.

The results of this transition, at least in the case of *Lisa*, is a successful, unassuming and intimate horror film that posits that familiar 1980s fear: that we don’t know or understand our neighbors. One may, in fact, be dangerous. Or even a psychotic killer. The 1980s perhaps represents the first movie age in which audiences truly became cognizant of wolves in sheep’s clothing, whether it be Alex in *Fatal*

Attraction or Richard (Moffet) in this film. *Lisa* also serves as a precautionary tale since the horror is generated when teenage Lisa, steps out of line and plays what she thinks is a game, only to become hooked up with the Candlelight Killer.

Yet *Lisa* is not the precautionary tale you might think. It isn't so much about a teen misbehaving as it concerns a mother who isolates her daughter with draconian rules and spurs the misbehavior, causes a negative reaction that then leads to the wrongdoing. To wit, Katherine, played by Cheryl Ladd, got pregnant at age 16 and had *Lisa*. She fears that the same thing will happen to *Lisa*. Katherine doesn't trust her daughter, and so she holds on too tight. *Lisa*'s response is to delve further into her world of games and scrapbooks, and she has no idea whom she has really dialed up on the other end of that line.

Although this is a small scale film, one of limited settings and creativity, the director builds a modicum of suspense and forecasts such work as *American Psycho* (2000) with its depiction of a stylish, handsome killer stalking women under the radar from his perfectly decorated apartment. The killer here is the next step beyond *Ten to Midnight* (1983), the yuppie dream twisted to new and perverse heights. Here, Richard doesn't kill for revenge, but because he feels that his victims need him and want him. He makes his victims participate in their own deaths and is utterly convinced of his own worth and attractiveness. Good looks, money and charm make him believe he is instantly desirable to women ... and that he can do anything to them.

Lisa generates its greatest suspense during the scenes that play *Lisa*'s naiveté against Richard's cunning. She's a sheep playing with a wolf, and she doesn't realize it, but both the audience and Richard do. There's a tense, high-anxiety scene that occurs in the killer's car. *Lisa* has found her way into the back seat and is hoping not to be discovered, as Richard—playing “Bad to the Bone” on the radio—prowls. *Lisa* fears that she will be discovered and be “embarrassed” to be stalking this good-looking hunk. She doesn't realize that the danger she faces could take her breath away.

Nor does *Lisa* realize how she leads her mother, Katherine, into the wolf's den. Everything she does (including using Katherine's credit card at the restaurant where Richard works) brings the Candlelight Killer closer to home and closer to her mother. Given this set-up, it's no surprise that the film's final confrontation in Katherine's apartment is so effective. For a time, the audience wonders if the film will have

the gumption to follow through with the confrontation it expects, or retreat into a teenage Nancy Drew-style close. To Sherman's credit, he gives the film its final boost in the climax, a violent confrontation that includes a baseball bat and lots and lots of violence.

Like *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), *Murder by Phone* (1980) and even *976-EVIL* (1988), *Lisa* adopts the telephone (and the answering machine) as its central avenue for terror. On the telephone, are you sure who you're talking to? Do you know who've you reached for certain? Remember, this movie came about before Caller ID. Today, the technology of anonymity has moved to the Internet but in modern American culture we always seem to have a place inside our houses and apartments where an outside terror can creep in. Could be an obscene phone caller, could be an IM from Hell, could be a serial killer...

Lisa was released theatrically and got mostly bad reviews (from the likes of Roger Ebert). His quibble with the film was simply that it was unrealistic, that the director had created a comic-book villain in the Candlelight Killer and that the movie played on coincidence. Yet, if we're being honest here, many of Hitchcock's finest films played on the coincidence of mistaken identity or the like, and—truthfully—is Rick any more a cartoon than Jason or Freddy? Or is he a step-up from the slasher culture, a missing link between the slasher and Hannibal Lecter? That matter is up for debate, but I disagree with Ebert that the film isn't suspenseful or realistic. The movie asks us to believe that a girl who likes to crank-call handsome men could dial up a killer, and bring him right to her doorstep. Maybe it's just because movies today have become so utterly fanciful, but *Lisa* didn't present any problems for this critic in the essential category of suspension of disbelief.

Lords of the Deep



Cast and Crew

CAST: Bradford Dillman (Commander Dobler); Priscilla Barnes (Clare McDowall); Daryl Haney (O'Neill); Melody Ryane (Barbara); Ed Lattimer (Seaver); Stephen Davies (Fernandez); Gregory Sobeck (Engel); Richard Young (Chadwick); John Lafayette (Shuttle Commander); Michael Adams (Shuttle Crewman).

CREW: Presented by: Concorde. Special Creature and Miniature Effects by: Mark Williams Effects. Director of Photography: Austin McKinney. Film Editor: Nina Gilbert. Music: Jim Berenholtz. Associate Producer: Rodman Flender. Written by: Howard R. Cohen, Daryl Haney. Produced by: Roger Corman. Directed by: Mary Ann Fisher. MPAA Rating: NR. Running time: 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 2020, a submarine en route to an undersea center loses contact during a quake, leaving the installation's commander Dobler (Dillman) in search of the missing vessel. The crew learns that it crashed with hatches blown, even as a scientist, Clare McDowall (Barnes), discovers a strange underwater protoplasm-like substance causes cosmic visions in anyone who touches it. The same substance is later found in a missing diver's suit, and Clare determines that the material can rapidly alter molecular structure.

As another quake looms, Clare realizes that this material is a fast-evolving life form, brethren to an alien race down in the sea below them (and responsible for the disappearance of the shuttle sub). It seems aliens have traveled to Earth's oceans to start over again, and want to warn humankind not to corrupt the environment, lest they suffer the same terrible fate.

COMMENTARY: On the release slates for 1989: *Deep Star Six*, *Leviathan* and James Cameron's *The Abyss*. All of them high-profile, futuristic underwater science-fiction or horror adventures. So leave it to legendary exploitation king Roger Corman to rush his own undersea epic, *Lords of the Deep*, into production as competition. Maybe—just maybe—some renters would get confused and accidentally take home his *magnum opus* instead of one of the “real” underwater movies?

Lords of the Deep takes place in the year 2020, inside “the World’s Most Expensive Undersea Lab,” which is a laughable assertion for anybody who’s actually seen *Deep Star Six*, *Leviathan* or *The Abyss*. This is a set that wouldn’t have looked futuristic in a spy movie from 1965. But anyway, it’s there, in that facility, that a dedicated scientist played by Priscilla Barnes becomes aware of a new alien life form ... and the utter evil of humanity!

Wait a minute! Priscilla Barnes as a scientist? Wasn’t she the nurse who roomed with Janet and Jack on *Three’s Company*? Yes indeed, but this actress also gave an utterly brilliant performance in 2005’s *The Devil’s Rejects*. And in point of fact, she really gives it her all in *Lords of The Deep*, straining to appear touched, amazed and awed by her

close encounter of the wet kind.

Unfortunately, the very limited special effects and sets Barnes must react to totally undercut the validity of her performance. Nobody could be awed by such fake effects. This is bargain basement science-fiction and horror at its most ridiculous. The “awe-inspiring” alien life form unfortunately resembles nothing so much as a surfboard with wings.

In fact, *Lords of the Deep* can’t even afford its own original special effects in some sequences. When Barnes experiences a psychedelic vision after first touching the alien life form, the film cuts unexpectedly to rerun footage from Corman’s *Galaxy of Terror* (1981). That’s the space warp and hyperjump to Morganthau footage!

It’s fun to take potshots at a “futuristic” movie that looks sewed together out of *Lost in Space* sets and which features a crew wearing goofy, *Next Generation*-type uniforms and mid-1980s haircuts. But give the devil his due: *Lords of the Deep* accurately predicts that corporations will control the future. There’s one line in the film that comes right out of the Bush II Administration:

“Let’s trust the business of science,” says one corporate stooge, Commander Dobler (Bradford Dillman), who is described as a “good company man” and worries excessively about secrecy and his people’s “non-disclosure agreements.”

No wonder the Earth is doomed.

A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child

★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

“Using a style nearly indebted to music videos—lots of fast cutting, odd angles and gratuitous camera moments—[director] Hopkins keeps the energy level up ... This isn’t the kind of filmmaking that wins awards or much critical attention, but the filmmakers are in there pitching anyway.”—Dave Kehr, “*Nightmare on Elm Street 5* Sends Fresh Fright From Freddy,” *The Chicago Tribune*, August 11, 1989, Section B.

“At this point, it was all wisecracks and clever killings. A direct sequel to the last film, this one shows Freddy trying to take over a baby’s soul or something like that. This series was getting tired at this point.

The next film, *Freddy's Dead*, would liven things up a bit (and only a bit).”—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lisa Wilcox (Alice); Kelly Jo Minter (Yvonne); Danny Hassel (Dan); Erika Anderson (Greta); Nick Mele (Alice's Dad); Joe Seely (Mark); Valorie Armstrong (Mrs. Jordan); Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger); Michael Ashton (Gurney Orderly) Beatrice Boepple (Amanda Krueger); Matt Borlengh (Jack); Burr De Benning (Mr. Jordan); Clarence Felder (Mr. Ray); E.R. Davies (Delivery Doctor); Beth De Patie (Anne); Will Egan (Semi-Truck Driver); Stephen Grives (Dr. Moore); Whitby Hertford (Jacob).

CREW: New Line Cinema, Heron Communications, Inc., & Smart Egg Pictures present a Robert Shaye Production, a Stephen Hopkins Film. *Casting:* Annette Benson. *Music:* Jay Ferguson. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Alan Munro. *Film Editor:* Chuck Weiss, Brent Schoenfeld. *Production Designer:* C.J. Strawn. *Director of Photography:* Peter Levy. *Executive Producers:* Sara Risher, Jon Turtle. *Screenplay:* Leslie Bohem. *Story:* John Skipp, Craig Spector, Leslie Bohem. *Produced by:* Robert Shaye, Rupert Harvey. *Stunt Coordinator:* Mike Cassidy. *Freddy Krueger's Makeup:* David Miller. *Freddy Baby & Resurrection Sequence:* David Miller Studio. *Optical Effects:* Visual Concept Engineering, Peter Kurian. *Freddy De-Merge Stop Motion:* Ted Rae. *Dan's Mechanical Suit/Freddy Bike:* R. Christopher Biggs. *Womb with a view/Fetal canal:* Rick Lazzarini. *Greta Prosthetics:* Todd Masters Company. *Diving Board/Phantom Prowler Sequences:* Doug Beswick Productions. *Freddy's Head De-Merge:* KNB Effects Group (Robert Kurtzman, Greg Nicotero, Howard Berger). *Original Nightmare theme:* Charles Bernstein. *Based on a character created by:* Wes Craven. *Directed by:* Stephen Hopkins. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Your birth was a curse on the whole of humanity.”—Freddy’s Mum has some unkind words for her offspring in *The Dream Child*.

SYNOPSIS: As high school graduation nears for Springwood lovers Alice (Wilcox) and Dan (Hassel), Alice dreams that she’s a nun who was locked in an asylum of one hundred maniacs and raped repeatedly—and the mother of Freddy Krueger (Englund). In her dreams, Alice sees the nun—Amanda Krueger (Boepple)—conceive Freddy, and realizes that the dream demon is trying to return. The nightmares confuse Alice, since she knows she vanquished Freddy, but

then she learns that she is pregnant and understands that Freddy is trying to return to wreak more havoc by entering the dreams of her developing embryo! In an effort to turn the growing life into a mirror image of himself, Freddy begins to feed the fetus the souls of his victims, which soon include Dan, the super-model-like Greta (Anderson), and comic-book artist Mark (Seely). Alice understands it is time to do battle with Freddy one more time, but the dream master needs help to win. She sends her friend Yvonne (Minter) to the old asylum to free the spirit of Amanda. Only by taking the dream demon back inside her, can Amanda vanquish Freddy. In the final battle, another unlikely ally also helps to defeat Freddy: Alice's unborn child, Jacob (Hertford).

COMMENTARY: Directed by Stephen Hopkins, *The Dream Child* arrived in theaters during the summer of *Batman*, *Lethal Weapon 2*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, *Licence to Kill*, *The Karate Kid III*, and *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan*. Like many of those sequels, it didn't fare well in the box office sweepstakes, and generated much less business than *The Dream Master*, the most financially successful entry in the series. Competition was certainly a factor in *The Dream Child*'s failure, but one can never forget that Freddy was also a TV star by this point (starring in his own series), and also New Line had released a staggering five *Elm Street* films in five years. The cinema was suffering from Freddy fatigue. But Krueger would return in the early 1990s, in *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (this time in 3-D!).

Still, it's a shame that *The Dream Child* failed, because as fifth installments go, it's not nearly as bad as it might have been. In fact, quality from *Dream Warriors* through *The Dream Child* remained relatively stable at a solid "mediocre." *The Dream Child* attempts to undo some of the popularization and mainstreaming of Freddy that had become so prevalent in the franchise.

To wit, Freddy remains in the shadows more in *A Nightmare on Elm Street V* than in his last two outings, and his makeup (provided by Freddy originator David Miller instead of Kevin Yagher) was revamped to prove a bit more gruesome, a bit more evil. The overall tenor of the film is also darker, and the nightmare sequences again concentrate more on the horrific than the fantastic (with the exception of a comic-book come to life). There's something creepy and organic about this film, with its concentration on an unborn fetus, babies, and motorcycles fusing with human skin. The film seems to inhabit a less clean, daylight world than *The Dream Master*, and that's a good thing.

However, as was the case with the preceding two installments of this saga, *The Dream Child* has great difficulty maintaining consistency in the overall story arc. It features an amazing, scary and gross birth sequence: It's the 1940s, and poor nun Amanda Krueger gives birth to a terrible monstrosity in a scene that movies like *It's Alive* only hinted at. However, this scene makes no sense at all in terms of Freddy's history. He was not born a deformed, twisted monstrosity like a mutant baby. He was born a normal man who grew up to become a monster. He's only "burned" and deformed after his burning, at the hands of the Elm Street parents. It's odd that this film imagines Krueger being born as a monster.

Secondly, *The Dream Child* features a scene in which Alice walks through a forest and finds the abandoned asylum where Amanda Krueger gave birth. This is the same facility that the ghost of Mrs. Krueger showed Neil in *Dream Warriors*. That adventure occurred two years ago, story time. Kristen, after all, was a patient at the Westin Hills facility. However, in *The Dream Child*, the sanitarium looks completely different (a matte painting with elaborate Gothic touches, including gargoyles) and the characters all insist it's been abandoned for forty years. When they go inside, it is abandoned, and Yvonne must locate Amanda Krueger's corpse to set her free. This revised history simply doesn't jibe with the previous entries. Kristen and Alice were best friends, and Alice also knew Kincaid and Joey, and they all were patients at Westin Hills!

Such inconsistencies with established Elm Street lore plays very much like an insult to the audience. Like a director and writer came aboard the project and just wanted to do their own thing, regardless of the franchise's history. This is not to lay the blame on anyone involved in *A Nightmare on Elm Street V*, because *Part IV* and *Part III* are just as guilty in their own way. Watch all the films in order (as I did for this book), and there are strange incongruities from picture to picture. Like. Someone. Just. Didn't. Care.

Despite such flaws, credit *The Dream Child* with finally leaving behind the high school milieu (at least mostly) for more adult concerns. Graduation has happened and suddenly Alice has to deal with an unwanted pregnancy. The specter of abortion is raised, especially after Alice takes a fantastic voyage into her own uterus to visit her fetus but spies the evil specter of Freddy Krueger there. The idea of abortion, the hottest of all hot button issues, is handled in a very casual, non-preachy fashion. Alice rejects the notion, but there's no judgment over this, and it's still hardly a pro-life film. Instead, the film focuses rightly on a woman's plight, and her decision about whether to carry a baby

to term. Motherhood (and prospective motherhood) has factored into some of the best horrors in screen history, including *Rosemary's Baby* and *It's Alive*. It's bold for what is essentially a mainstream picture to face an unpleasant, but very real topic.

Daringly, *The Dream Child* follows the same muse when dealing with another character, Greta. She has an eating disorder (bulimia), and possibly anorexia and so her nightmare involves being force-fed to death by Freddy. Again, this is the same psychologically facile idea evidenced in earlier films: that one character quality can be exploited by Freddy in a nightmare. Only here, as in the baby subplot, the character quirks and foibles are darker, more serious. That's the way things should go in horror films, especially horror films about nightmares, the terrain where our subconscious anxieties go unfettered.

Stephen Hopkins' camera is more fluid than Harlin's and Russell's, and he makes the most out of the grim, opening scenes in the 1940s institution. These scenes are amongst the best and most frightening of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies since the 1984 original, but Hopkins' take on the other set pieces are hit and miss. Mark's death, which involves Freddy on a skateboard pretending to be a superhero called the Phantom Prowler, is truly cringe-worthy. "Faster than a bastard maniac! More powerful than a local madman! It's Super Freddy!" That joke may just be Freddy's nadir in the 1980s, though many of his other bon mots, including "Better not dream and drive" (to Dan) also rank pretty low.

Most of all, what keeps *The Dream Child* humming along at a decent clip is the narrative through-line about Alice's dilemma involving her baby. She's afraid of what her child will be; she wants to protect it; and she has to fend off Dan's parents, who want to adopt the child. In dealing with all of these competing emotions and stresses, not to mention Freddy, Lisa Wilcox gives a terrific—and adult—performance in the lead role. She's the film's most valuable player, since the other teens are mostly interchangeable. It's a fascinating notion that Freddy can only get to her through the dreams of her fetus. "As the fetus develops," we are informed, "it can spend 70 percent of its day in a dream state."

And that means that Freddy can have a field day. Which is a good thing, especially since this movie attempts to revert Krueger back to the ugly, monstrous boogeyman he began as.

976-EVIL

★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stephen Geoffreys (Hoax); Jim Matzler (Marty Johnson); Maria Rubell (Angela); Lezlie Deane (Suzie); J.J. Cohen (Marcus); Pat O'Bryan (Spike); Sandy Dennis (Aunt Lucy); Darren Burrows (Jeff); Gunther Jensen (Airhead); Jim Thiebaud (Rags); Robert Picardo (Mark Dark); Jon Slade (John Doe); Wendy Cook (Gang Girl); Thom McFadden (Minister); Larry Turk (Operator #1); Roxanne Rogers (Waitress).

CREW: Cinetel Films, Inc., Presents a Robert Englund Film. *Director of Photography:* Paul Elliot. *Casting:* Barbara Claman, Margaret McSharry. *Film Editor:* Stephen Myers. *Music:* Thomas Chase, Steve Rucker. *Art Director:* David Brian Miler. *Makeup Effects:* Kevin Yagher Productions. *Executive Producer:* Paul Hertzberg. *Producer:* Lisa M. Hansen. *Written by:* Rhet Topham, Brian Helgeland. *Directed by:* Robert Englund. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “Push 666 for your horoscope now!”—The evil phone machine suggests a course of action in Robert Englund’s directorial debut.

SYNOPSIS: Spike (O’Bryan), a young motorcycle-riding punk living with his wacko Christian Aunt Lucy (Dennis) and her nerdy cousin, Hoax (Geoffreys) begins to take advice from his “horoscope” at the phone service 976-EVIL. Jealous of Spike’s relationship with his girlfriend, Susan, Hoax calls 976-EVIL and gets instructions to kill her with poisonous spiders. Meanwhile, a private investigator tracks down the owners of 976-EVIL and finds a sleazy company and an automated phone machine that’s been turned off for three months. The messages, it seems, are coming straight from Hell! Can Spike help pull Hoax back from the precipice of evil, even as he grows ever more under its power, transforming into a demon himself?

COMMENTARY: If Robert Englund’s directorial debut *976-EVIL* is any indication of his behind-the-scenes aesthetic, then this talented and popular actor shouldn’t quit his day job. The actors deliver their lines with all the wit and subtlety of characters from the sitcom *Mama’s Family*, and Sandy Dennis—as Aunt Lucy—is the worst of the worst. Her portrayal is so cartoony, so two-dimensional, so non-stop awful that it literally jolts one right out of the movie.

On the surface, this is another “the worm turns” movie. Like *Laserblast*

(1978), *Fade to Black* (1980) and *Evilspeak* (1982), it involves a little loser who finds a power (either supernatural or extraterrestrial) and then uses it to hurt his enemies in horrible fashion. *976-EVIL* isn't particularly helped in this regard, as its "evil" gang threatening Hoax may be the most unthreatening punks ever to disgrace the silver screen. They sit around in a dark room and gamble most of the time; one member is played by Darren Burrows, the whisper-thin actor who portrayed the gentle Indian Ed on *Northern Exposure*.

It takes *976-EVIL* nearly an hour to get to the point where Hoax (after suffering such indignities as having his head forced down a toilet) begins to transform into a monster himself. He then goes on the *de rigueur* rampage, amputating one bully's hand and ripping out two hearts. This is the point when the movie should really burst to life, but it just limps along, and ultimately confuses itself. For instance, Hoax's house suddenly transforms into an icy winter wonderland, where graffiti such as "No Mercy" and "Death from Below" decorates the frozen walls. But then, a moment later, Hell is—as you'd expect—a blazing underworld. So which is it, movie? Is Hell icy or burning? *976-EVIL* can't commit from one scene to the next.

Although the idea of a hotline to Hell is prime material, especially given the proliferation of 1-900 numbers in the late 1980s, *976-EVIL* doesn't do much with it. Robert Picardo is a delight—as always—in the role of the sleazy line operator, but he's not in the movie long enough to keep it from sinking.

Still, Englund stages one scene very effectively. Hoax summons spiders to kill Spike's girlfriend, Susan. Suddenly, spiders begin popping out of a frozen dinner and skittering through Susan's kitchen. If one is arachniphobic, this scene will have a real impact. You'll be checking the sofa for spiders all day.

LEGACY: A sequel to *976-EVIL*, subtitled *The Astral Factor*, was made in 1991, directed by Jim Wynorski.

Out of the Dark

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Cameron Dye (Kevin); Karen Black (Ruth Wilson); Bud Cort (Dave Stringer); Lynn Danielson (Kristi); Starr Andreoff (Camille); Divine (Langelia); Geoffrey Lewis (Dennis); Tracey Walters (Lt.

Meyers); Karen Mayo-Chandler (Barbara); Silvana Gallardo (McDonald); Karen Witter (JoAnn); Angela Robinson (Vanessa); Lainie Kazan (Hooker/Nancy); Tab Hunter (Driver); Paul Bartel (Hotel Clerk); Charles Champion (Young Cop); Zane W. Levitt (Coroner).

CREW: Cinetel Films Presents a Michael Schroeder film. *Co-Producer:* David C. Thomas. *Music:* Paul F. Antonelli, David Wheatley. *Production Design:* Robert Schulenberg. *Costume Design:* Elisabeth Scott. *Film Editor:* Mark Manos. *Director of Photography:* Julio Macat. *Executive Producer:* Paul Bartel. *Stunt Coordinator:* Mike Cassidy. *Screenplay by:* J. Gregory De Felice, Zane W. Levitt. *Produced by:* Zane W. Levitt. *Directed by:* Michael Shroeder. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

INCANTATION: “He probably gets more ass than a toilet seat.”—An envious detective describes model photographer Kevin (Cameron Dye) in *Out of the Dark*.

SYNOPSIS: An employee of the Suite Nothings Phone Fantasy Company is brutally murdered in McArthur Park by a baseball bat-wielding maniac dressed as Bobo the Clown. The police suspect Kevin Silvers (Dye), a young photographer who sometimes takes provocative pictures of the Suite Nothings girls. However, he insists he is innocent, and sets about finding the real killer. Among the suspects are: David Stringer (Cort), a creepy accountant working in the Suite Nothings Building, and Dennis (Lewis), a porno photographer and drunk who has an old beef with Dye. Detective Meyers (Walters) leads the investigation, and with the help of Suite Nothings’ boss, Ruth (Black), sets up a sting to catch the killer. The sting goes horribly wrong when the clown kills another phone sex girl. Aware that his girlfriend, Kristi (Danielson)—another employee of Suite Nothings—may be the next victim, Kevin hides out with her in a sleazy motel, only to have Bobo follow. The book is finally closed on the Phone Sex Killer when a suspect is killed in a freak auto accident. But all is not as it seems.

COMMENTARY: Going as far back as silent days, there’s been something absolutely terrifying about clowns on film. And a clown on film at night? Even worse. In the 1980s, the clown as a villain had a brief comeback in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* (1988) and the TV-movie based on the Stephen King tome, *It*. Michael Shroeder’s *Out of the Dark* adds another title to that roster. It’s a real, honest-to-goodness exploitation film featuring lots of T & A, not to mention plenty of brutal violence orchestrated by Bobo, one nightmare of a circus freak.

Perhaps the best scene remains the clown's first, unexpected appearance. Out of the blue, a nice woman in the park runs into Bobo, a purple-haired clown boasting a big red nose. Bobo proceeds to club this lady to death with a bat. It's violent imagery, made even more disturbing by the strange glee painted on the perpetrator's facial features. But the movie doesn't do much more with the concept other than surprise and startle in this first scene. One feels that the movie probably could have done more with the "creepy clown" idea.

Out of the Dark, set primarily in the world of a phone sex line company, takes great pain to indicate that this is not at all a sleazy or sexy business, but rather just a work-a-day career boasting regular women as employees. Why, respectable Karen Black even runs the company! Yet the movie then undercuts whatever pro-feminine message might be brewing underneath by cutting immediately to a scene with a sex-line worker (and model) primping and strutting with her shirt off. There's even slow-motion photography to prolong the moment of nudity. Again, revealing some pulchritudinous flesh in a horror film is just fine, from any variety of angles, but it seems a tad disingenuous for this movie to make the point that sex-workers aren't sleazy, only to follow that scene with an exploitation of that old favorite, "the breast part of the movie."

A latecomer in the crowded 1980s slasher field, *Out of the Dark* utilizes the phone sex line as its organizing principle, and primarily to bring in gorgeous, super-model quality gals to be killed off. There's a crime in the past, the break-up of a circus, and this development caused Bobo to go nuts. And then there's a red herring or two in the forms of Bud Cort and reliable old Geoffrey Lewis (*The Devil's Rejects* [2005]). The final girl, Christie, is neither particularly clever nor interesting, and ultimately, she doesn't even kill Bobo, who turns out to be the schizophrenic alternate personality of the hero, Kevin.

Out of the Dark also features several cameo appearances by quasi-famous actors. Divine shows up as a legendary detective and Paul Bartel as a weird hotel clerk. Lainie Kazan appears too, as a streetwalker who prefers to talk about the stock market. Ironically, not one of these highly individual actors—not even the grand Divine—is able to drive the story in a single interesting direction, or provide the film with the smallest variation in the slasher paradigm, which here—by 1989—feels old and worn out.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Randy Quaid (Nick Laemle); Mary Beth Hurt (Lily Laemle); Sandy Dennis (Miss Dew); Bryan Madorsky (Michael Laemle); Kathryn Grody (Mrs. Baxter); Juno Mills-Cockell (Sheila); Deborah Rush (Mrs. Zellner); Graham Jarvis (Mr. Zellner); Helen Cars Callon (Grandma); Warran Van Evera (Grandfather); Wayne Robson (Lab Attendant).

CREW: A Vestron Pictures Presentation in association with Great American Films Ltd. Partnership, a Bob Balaban Film. *Casting:* Risa Brannon, Billy Hopkins. *Costume Designer:* Arthur Rowsell. *Directors of Photography:* Ernest Day, Robin Vidgeon. *Film Editor:* Bill Pankow. *Executive Producers:* Mitchell Cannold, Steven Reuther. *Written by:* Christopher Hawthorne. *Produced by:* Bonnie Palef. *Directed by:* Bob Balaban. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the late 1950s or early 1960s, young Michael Laemle (Madorsky) suffers from recurrent nightmares, even as his family moves to a new neighborhood and he makes a new friend at school, Sheila Zellner (Mills-Cockell). His unusual parents, Nick (Quaid) and Lily (Hurt) enjoy leftovers every night, and Michael grows concerned when they can't explain precisely what the meals were before they were leftovers. One of Michael's strange drawings alerts a school social worker, Miss Dew (Dennis), to the boy's strange home life, and she learns that one nightmare revolves around the night when Michael went downstairs and caught his parents doing ... something. When Miss Dew visits the Laemle house, she is murdered and served up as dinner. A terrified Michael learns that his parents are cannibals, and worse, they want him to join the club.

COMMENTARY: *Parents* is a brilliant, offbeat evocation of late 1950s suburbia, an overturning of myths perpetuated on TV sitcoms such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Ozzie & Harriet* that family life during the post-war decade was perfect, blissful, and unencumbered by discord, family dysfunction or strife. Instead, *Parents* suggests, there was a dark underbelly to life in the era of Eisenhower, and this is an especially pertinent observation given that many social scientists have equated the 1950s to the 1980s, the time of the film's release.

To many conservative politicians, the 1950s represents the last "great" time in American history. There was no Civil Rights movement yet (and thus no Affirmative Action), the hippie movement and sexual revolution (and thus feminism) had not yet occurred, and the white

man was the unequivocal head of the household. This was the world of *Father Knows Best*. Women didn't work, abortion was illegal, and children were to be seen, but not heard. The country was even ruled by an avuncular old man (shades of Reagan). It was truly Rick Santorum's paradise. Yet, the 1950s also was a decade of rampant racism, and of alcohol and sleeping pill abuse. The arrival of the birth control pill was near, so there was clearly an undercurrent of worry to the epoch too. In other words—just like the 1980s—the “don’t worry, be happy” surface combined with the “be afraid, be very afraid” underside of life. The love of Reagan and the 1980s is in some senses a nostalgia for the pre-Vietnam, pre-Watergate, pre-*Roe vs. Wade* 1950s.

Parents navigates this world of the late 1950s with David Lynchian quirkiness, potent horror imagery and a nasty sense of humor. The film concerns a boy, Michael, who just knows there is something off about his parents. His father warns him not to be “dark” in his head, and the boy views going to sleep as a terror, a one-way ticket to a world of nightmares. To express this anxiety, director Balaban at one point features a receding P.O.V. shot from the boy’s perspective as he is carried away on his father’s shoulder at bedtime. The living room and its safety and placid Mommy get further away as he nears his room, and the place where terrors grow. At one point, when he jumps into bed, the mattress and sheets give way to a lake of blood in which Michael nearly drowns.

The horror lurking “underneath” in *Parents* is one which all kids face in some fashion. It’s the specter of sex; the fear of whatever it is that Mom and Dad are doing together after the child goes to bed. When discovered, the parents act guilty and angry, as though they’ve been “caught.” It’s no coincidence that the bed is the place where Michael confronts this fear. “The only time you have nightmares is when you take your pajamas off,” Mom warns the boy, indicating a state of undress, and hinting at masturbation.

However, *Parents* pulls an interesting switcheroo. The taboo that Michael uncovers and that involves his folks is not sex, but cannibalism. Turns out they eat human beings ... and love it. What Michael sees when he wakes up from a nightmare is not his parents making love on the dining room table, as is first indicated, but devouring human meat, their faces red not with smeared lipstick, but blood. Frankly, it’s unsavory the way the film links sex and cannibalism, with bloody close-ups of the Laemle parents necking and canoodling. Indeed, even the final images of the film, where Mom and Dad turn on each other, is a twisted perversion of lovemaking, Nick’s

knife penetrating Mom's middle, and forcing her to wriggle and writhe, as though achieving orgasm.

From the polka music on the radio while Mom tirelessly prepares dinner to the decor of the Laemle split-level house, every detail of the 1950s-early '60s is brought to life with loving attention. This is the placid, "normal" surface. Where *Parents* really goes nuts is in its depiction of the underside. There isn't just the "bloody" bed that Michael dives into, but several other horrific visions. In one, a human hand twists and convulses in the kitchen sink's garbage disposal. In another, Michael becomes trapped in the pantry and is nearly strangled by a snake-like sausage. Finally, in perhaps the film's most tense moment, a kindly social worker is attacked in the pantry by an assailant with a butcher's knife. She grabs the knife to keep it from slashing her and—in a repeat of a scene from Richard Franklin's *Psycho II*—clutches the blade. When it is retracted, it leaves her hands reddened, moist and useless.

What lurks under the happy, vapid face of suburbia? A man who drinks too many cocktails? A wife addicted to sleeping pills? Rampant, hungry sexuality? That and more, according to *Parents*. The suburbs are actually feeding on themselves, twisted by secret desires and taboos that could scar a child for life. What's worse than *coitus interruptus*? *Cannibal interruptus*. But it's funny how similar those things might look to young, frightened eyes.

Pet Sematary

★ ★ ★ ½

Critical Reception

"A fine adaptation of one of Stephen King's scariest novels, originally to be directed by George A. Romero, but Mary Lambert does a fine job. Fred Gwynne gives a classic performance as a Maine curmudgeon with a great accent, and the film is only slightly spoiled by the overall cuteness of the little kid in the third act. Creepy stuff, and one of the best King adaptations of the decade."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*, Powys Media.

"Stephen King once confessed that his worst fear was the death of one of his children. He tackled that fear head-on in his novel *Pet Sematary*. In the film adaptation, we see the American Dream gone sour. A Norman Rockwell aesthetic turns to American Gothic as the Creed

family disintegrates, with sometimes horrifying and downright silly results. Though it takes several false steps, this film—like *The Shining*—has a few scenes that will be burned into the viewer's memory: the ghost Pascow appearing at Louis's bedside, and mad sister Zelda writhing and cackling on her deathbed. Since horror films are often remembered for particular moments, rather than a coherent plot, this has to rank as one of the more effective King adaptations.”—Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, McFarland and Company, 2004.

“Stunningly creepy all the way until the very end, when the director goes for schlock instead of sticking with the hanging ending of the Stephen King novel. This is by far King’s darkest work, and the only one with an utterly downbeat ending.”—Scott Nicholson, author of *The Farm*.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dale Midkiff (Louis Creed); Fred Gwynne (Jud Crandall); Denise Crosby (Rachel Creed); Brad Greenquist (Victor Pascow); Michael Lombard (Irwin); Miko Hughes (Gage Creed); Blaze Berdahl (Ellie Creed); Susan Blommaert (Missy Dandridge); Mara Clark (Marcy Charlton); Kavi Raz (Steve Masterson); Mary Louise Wilson (Dory Goldman); Andrew Hubatsek (Zelda); Liz Davies (Girl in Infirmary); Kara Dalke (Candy Striper); Matthew August Fennel (Jud as a Child); Stephen King (Minister).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Richard P. Rubinstein Production of a Mary Lambert Film. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Pamela Basker. *Associate Producer:* Ralph S. Singleton. *Music:* Elliot Goldenthal. “*Pet Sematary*” by: Dee Dee Ramone and Daniel Rey, performed by: The Ramones. *Costume Design:* M. Stewart. *Film Editors:* Michael Hill, Daniel Hainley. *Production Designer:* Michael Z. Hanan. *Director of Photography:* Peter Stein. *Co-Producer:* Mitchell Galin. *Executive Producer:* Tim Zinnemann. *Based upon the novel by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* Richard M. Rubinstein. *Special Makeup Designs by:* Lance Anderson. *Special Makeup Effects by:* David Anderson. *Special Visual Effects by:* Fantasy II Film Effects, Gene Warren Jr. *Directed by:* Mary Lambert. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Creed family moves into a new house in Maine near a very busy road that roars almost constantly with the engines of trucks. Behind the house is a long wooded path and a pet cemetery, that is shown to Louis, his wife Rachel (Crosby) and children Ellie (Berdahl) and Gage (Hughes) by a local, Jud Crandall (Gwynne). On his first day

on the job as doctor on a college campus, Louis treats a jogger, Pascow (Greenquist), who has been hit by a car and soon dies. But after he expires, Pascow returns to life briefly and warns Louis not to visit the Indian burial ground beyond the pet cemetery because the ground there is “sour.”

When Ellie’s cat, Church, is hit by a truck, Jud lead Louis up to the burial ground and tells him to bury the cat there. The next day the cat is alive again, but strange and hostile. Before Louis can contemplate this strange event for too long, another tragedy occurs. While flying a kite at a picnic, young Gage wanders into the street and is struck by a truck.

With his little boy dead, Louis contemplates burying his body in the “sour” ground of the Indian burial plot, over the objections of Judd and the ghost Pascow. Louis forges ahead and Gage returns from the grave with a murderous disposition. Before long, Louis and Judd must face the consequences of their actions.

COMMENTARY: “Stephen King is one sick motherfucker!”

Those are the precise words shouted by an agitated movie-goer from the back of the auditorium where I first saw *Pet Sematary* in a theater in 1989. That indignant exclamation came after a particularly brutal scene: the death of a cute-as-a-button young boy, struck head-on by a speeding truck on a busy road. I’ve never forgotten that outburst, neither its tone nor its content. The offended shout is not just an indicator that horror movies are a powerful group experience, but that—at its very best and most powerful—the genre shatters viewer expectations, and more importantly, societal taboos.

Is Stephen King a sick motherfucker? Indeed not. This writer would submit, instead, that he is merely an artist with a finely developed sense of his own dark side and worst fears. His great gift as a writer and storyteller is that his fears are universal; they’re ours too. What’s confronted at point-blank range in *Pet Sematary* is something that isn’t often broached in horror films: the inevitability—and utter unacceptability—of death. Oh, humans have developed mythology around death called religion, but it’s really just a balm—the opiate of the masses—to help us cope with the reality that one day, for each and every one of us, the journey ends. It’s over. We all have to die. That’s the one thought we can’t escape in the middle of the night, isn’t it?

Death is ubiquitous in horror films, of course. Characters die all the

time in monster movies, the savage cinema and serial killer flicks. Yet, certain formulas, including the slasher paradigm, have almost clinically removed the actual fear of death from the genre. Jason kills camp counselors, and sometimes we even care, but mostly we laugh or cringe. Rarely are horror films so effectively conceived, staged and vetted that we, as viewers, are asked to really confront death head on; to countenance our own end, or the deaths of the ones we cherish.

Pet Sematary is a deep, dark movie that forces us to do just that. It faces death in a way most movies won't, or simply can't, and in the place we dread it most: our immediate family. Yes, at points (particularly the ill-advised ending) it descends into campy excess, yet overall this is a movie that ponders death meaningfully. It asks us what we would do if we lost someone whom we love, and what we would do to bring them back. What would be worse, the movie asks, facing death or the specter of a corrupted—perhaps evil—fiction of life?

The film's ad line, "Sometimes dead is better," immediately tells you how Mr. King feels on the subject. But it's material that isn't just academic or abstract. The advent of cat and dog cloning means that, at least metaphorically, many pet owners will be burying their loved ones in a pet cemetery for years to come. What honor does that do to the original model?

Pet Sematary may be the best novel Stephen King ever wrote, though the material is not easily translatable to film, since so much of it concerns internal emotions like grief, anguish and desperation. The movie is a vastly different and ultimately less satisfying experience than the book, even though it's relatively faithful in terms of its storyline, and yet ... there's something to this cinematic effort. The most difficult aspect about death is letting go of the person (or pet) that you love so much, missing them, and knowing that you will never share their presence again.

This movie explores that idea more fully than most horror films, and reminded me of *Don't Look Now* (1973) in the way that it charts the notion of one character, Dale Midkoff's Louis Creed, racing headlong to a dire fate, unaware of the pleas of those around him. He keeps making the same mistake again and again (which some people would define as insanity) yet because Louis refuses to accept loss, this will be his destiny. The movie's end is cheesy, but there's a certain logic to it. More than that, the film makes a reach and plays as tragedy, with Louis as something of a hubristic Greek hero (conquering death) and being warned to change his ways (playing God) by a Cassandra figure

(Pascow) whom will never be heeded.

Mary Lambert peppers the film with unsettling images and ideas. Almost immediately she creates an opposition between the idyllic “normal” and safe life of the Creed family and the looming specter of death. She does so by contrasting views of a tire swing and a rural, wooded path with the foreboding image of the nearby road. Almost immediately after the credits, a truck roars by the house, and it is only the first of many. This is important, because the road represents death, it’s the very thing that kills Church the cat and then little Gage. By keeping trucks speeding by and the road in so many shots, Lambert is cuing the audience to understand that death is only a footstep away from the family, as it is, in fact, for all of us. One wrong move and death wins, because we’re fragile creatures and we don’t control the environment. Even doctors like Louis can’t work miracles.

Pet Sematary is a balls-to-the-wall horror film that doesn’t play favorites or cheat. In that notorious scene, a child who innocently chases a kite onto a busy road is struck by one of those damn trucks. Alas, this is not a fantasy image, but a very realistic one. For years, I’ve been haunted by the story I once read of a boy running to catch a school bus, his father mere feet away. The boy tripped, and fell under the wheels of the moving vehicle and his head was crushed. These things happen all the time because we’re mortal and death intrudes. We could obsess on such tragedies every day of our lives (especially as parents), *Pet Sematary* lives in that place of fear. In that place of guilt, because the accident wasn’t avoided. In that place of fantasy, wherein you dream you can undo the horror that occurred. In that place of hope that there is a way to bring back the dead. Here, *Pet Sematary* dwells, and it’s quite a disturbing, sad picture, really.

Pet Sematary remains a controversial film among the horror faithful, I believe, because—at times—there’s a disconnect between the hardcore nature of the King material and the manner in which the undead are presented visually. It’s hard to countenance cartoony zombies and monsters that look piped in straight from lighter fare like *Creepshow* (1982) with such deep, existential questions about death and our existence. No doubt, this is a film that would have benefited from a more naturalistic, less theatrical presentation, but all films reflect the prevailing Zeitgeist, and this movie came out at a time when such naturalistic horrors weren’t the norm. Indeed, it’s ludicrous to expect that a studio with a great deal of money on the line would suddenly take a left turn with a popular Stephen King property and make it a dark, brooding, serious movie, rather than a crowd-pleasing, replete-with-jolts roller-coaster.

But even in this less-than-satisfying vernacular, *Pet Sematary* succeeds beyond expectations. It's a scary film, and more than that, the kind of movie that you find yourself still thinking about several days after a viewing; when you're in your bed, tossing and turning, and your mind won't quiet, and thoughts of death hover over you.

Phantom of the Opera

★ ★ ½

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Erik Destler/The Phantom); Jill Schoelen (Christine); Alex Hyde-White (Richard); Bill Nighy (Barton); Terence Harvey (Hawking); Stephaney Lawrence (Carlotta); Nathan Lewis (Davies); Peter Clapham (Harrison); Molly Shannon (Meg in New York); Emma Rawson (Meg in London); Mark Ryan (Mott); Yehuda Efroni (Ratcatcher); Terence Beesley (Joseph); Ray Jewers (Kline); Robin Hunter (Roland); Virginia Fiol (Sarah); Cathy Murphy (Esther); Andre Thornton Grimes (Bartender); Jaclyn Mendoza (Maddie); John Ghavani (Dwarf).

CREW: 21st Century Film Corporation presents a Menahem Golan production of Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*. *Associate Producer:* Eliezer Ben-Chorin. *Art Director:* Tivadar Bertalan. *Makeup Effects Created by:* Kevin Yagher. *Additional Prosthetic Makeup Effects:* Magical Media Industries, John Buechler. *Music:* Misha Segal. *Unit Production Manager:* Marc S. Fischer. *First Assistant Director:* Michael Engel. *Casting:* Nancy Lara-Hansch, Maggi Sanguin. *Costume Designer:* John Bloomfield. *Film Editor:* Charles Bornstein. *Director of Photography:* Elemer Ragalyi. *Executive Producer:* Menahem Golan. *Based on a Screenplay by:* Gerry O'Hara. *Screenplay by:* Duke Sandefu. *Produced by:* Harry Alan Towers. *Directed by:* Dwight H. Little. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In modern-day Manhattan, a second year Juilliard student, Christine Day (Schoelen) performs an Erik Destler opera called "Don Juan Triumphant" at an audition for a new show. It's an old, unfinished and unusual piece by a composer who is rumored to have been a lovelorn psychopathic killer.

While Christine is performing, a sand-bag strikes her in the head and she finds herself whisked back to 1885 Victorian London, where she is a young opera singer-understudy for the diva, Carlotta. As opening

night approaches, Christine is tutored by an “angel” she believes has been sent by her dead father, but is really Erik Destler (Englund), the Phantom of the Opera. He sees to it that Carlotta is in no position to perform on opening night, and Christine makes a big debut.

The Phantom made a deal with the Devil, that he would be loved for his music for all of time. The Devil agreed, but made sure that audiences would love him only for his music, and scarred him terribly, making him horrible to look upon. Now the Phantom skins his victims and wears their stitched-together faces to appear more normal. Christine falls under the spell of the Phantom, much to the chagrin of her suitor, Richard (Hyde-White). When the Phantom abducts Christine to his lair in the sewers deep beneath the opera house, Richard and the police go in search of her. Christine survives the battle between Richard and the Phantom and is returned (by the shattering of a mirror) to the 20th century.

When she wakes up from her sand-bag incident, Christine is given the part in “Don Juan Triumphant.” And one of the producers is a very familiar looking fellow, or rather, Phantom.

COMMENTARY: No doubt it was a big deal in 1989 to spotlight Robert “The King of Horror” Englund in the title role of that classic genre trope, *The Phantom of the Opera*, yet today the casting choice hardly seems scintillating. Englund is certainly capable of bringing *gravitas* to the storied (and tragic) Leroux anti-hero, but in this case, all he brings along is 1980s-style baggage.

The creators of this version of the legendary material must have been bound and determined to graft Freddy Krueger-like qualities onto the classic character, and so before a viewer can even scream “Andrew Lloyd Webber,” this cinematic phantom is resorting to juicy *bon mots* from the Krueger repertoire.

“You’re a thing from Hell,” one victim tells this Phantom. “And you sir, are Hellbound,” quips Englund floridly.

Not very funny or thrilling, is it? Let’s face it, this isn’t exactly the material that fans of the Phantom are seeking in a re-imagining of the material. And besides, by 1989 Freddy was pretty dried up anyway, dishing out leftovers and fending off threats from a legion of imitators (*Bad Dreams*, *The Horror Show*, *Shocker*, etc.).

With *Edge of Sanity* and *Phantom of the Opera* both arriving in 1989, it’s clear that contemporary horror movies were stepping back and re-

thinking the slasher-filled films of the decade and looking for more literary sources, a trend that reached its pinnacle with high-profile efforts such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) and Kenneth Branagh's *Frankenstein* (1994). The problem is that the material vetted in *Phantom of the Opera* has been done better frequently—before *and* after this film, on both TV and on celluloid.

The only way this *Phantom of the Opera* truly distinguishes itself is in adding updated ghoulish touches, which means gory makeup and increased on-screen violence. Although one character admonishes another that “ghosts don’t skin their victims,” the film labors over scenes of Englund stitching-up a new face out of human skin so as to appear quasi-normal. When this Leatherface-like material isn’t the focus of Dwight Little’s camera, the Phantom is left with nothing to do but easily dispatch victims who have little to do with the central narrative.

For instance, while the Phantom is composing a tune in a tavern (!), he is pestered by a thief. The Phantom dispatches this nuisance along with two of his buddies in a dark alley in short order; flipping, whipping and stabbing them with supernatural strength and reflexes. Again, the sequence feels more like a Freddy set piece than anything else, only minus the finger-knives and rubber reality.

Speaking of rubber reality, *The Phantom of the Opera*’s chances of success were dramatically undercut by its bizarre central conceit that Christine Day is a 1980s-era music student who—courtesy of a bump on the head (quick, call the Three Stooges)—travels back in time to the heyday of the Phantom. Then, the destruction of the Phantom’s mirror in his underground lair zings her back to our present, just in time for a sting-in-the-tail/tale ending featuring a modern-day Phantom.

Again, one feels that this temporal story element is merely a crass attempt to make the film commercial and relevant by keeping it in our time period. Audiences wouldn’t buy into a teen “final girl” from a century ago, apparently.

These criticism might not matter so much had this *Phantom of the Opera* exerted the energy to plumbed the emotional depths of the Phantom and the people in his life. Should we feel pity for this Phantom? *Hated*? He’s made a pact with Satan, after all, but the Devil double-crossed him and took his beauty, so he’s a classic Faustian figure. In fact, the film feels like *Faust* in another regard: the way to destroy the villain is to destroy his work, in this case his music.

Still, the movie never decides how the audience should view the character, and as a result Englund's Phantom is strangely remote and distancing. This Phantom also lacks charisma and the romantic qualities that later made him such a hit in the Broadway musical. Here he's just a sneering bogeyman.

Englund is a fine actor, but he's a naturalistic one, adept at playing sleazy modern characters, and it just seems like he's ill at ease in this more theatrical venue. Perhaps director Dwight Little was going for a more immediate, more gory, more *fleshy* version of *Phantom of the Opera*. It is more faithful than some versions of the story (leaving aside, for a moment, the 1980s preamble and coda) but it doesn't come together very excitingly or convincingly. This isn't so much a bad horror film as it is a flat, listless one.

"This motion picture is not associated with any current or prior stage production or motion picture of the same title," a disclaimer reads at the end of this *Phantom of The Opera*. It states the matter succinctly and accurately.

Shocker

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

"*Shocker* has a bright moment now and then. The best is a little girl, her body commandeered by Pinker, dragging her leg as she scampers through a park ... Pretty funny."—V.A. Musetto, *The New York Post*, October 27, 1989.

"Craven has constructed the escalating mayhem with such craft that disbelief is ... at least given pause ... Its highs are freaky and unpredictable enough to endow it with some real potential as a rollicksome midnight cult movie."—Elliott Stein, *Village Voice*, November 7, 1989.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mitch Pileggi (Horace Pinker); John Tesh (Newscaster); Heather Langenkamp (Victim); Peter Berg (Jonathan Parker); Jessica Craven (Counterperson); Cami Cooper (Allison); Richard Brooks (Rhino); Sam Scarber (Cooper); Theodore Raimi (Pac Man); Virginia Morris (Diane); Emily Samuel (Sally); Michael Murphy (Lt. Donald Parker); Peter Tilden (Reporter); Bingham Ray (Bartender); Susan Ann

Harris (Waitress); Eugene Chadbourne (Man in Bar); Jack Hoar (Sergeant); Stephen Held (Rookie); Timothy Leary (TV Evangelist).

CREW: A Universal Pictures Release of an Alive Films Presentation. *Executive Producers:* Shep Gordon, Wes Craven. *Casting:* Gary M. Zuckerbrod. *Co-Producers:* Peter Foster, Bob Engelman. *Costume Designer:* Isis Mussenden. *Music:* William Goldstein. *Production Design:* Cynthia Kay Charette. *Special Makeup Design:* Lance Anderson. *Film Editor:* Andy Blumenthal. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Produced by:* Marianne Maddalena, Barin Kumar. *Written and Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 111 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’m nationwide now!”—A joyous Horace Pinker (Mitch Pileggi) is unbound in Wes Craven’s 1989 film, *Shocker*.

SYNOPSIS: After being injured during football practice, college student Jonathan Parker (Berg) experiences a vision involving the mass murderer who is currently killing whole families. Jonathan sees with horror that Horace Pinker (Pileggi) is killing his (Jonathan’s) mother and sister (Langenkamp). After this vision, Jonathan’s dad, a police detective (Murphy) confirms that the family has been brutally murdered. Parker leads his father and the police to Parker, and he is apprehended. But Pinker is no ordinary killer: He has made a pact with Satan, and after his is able to return to the “real” world, hopping bodies and affecting appliances and even TV transmissions. Jonathan hopes to trap Pinker in the universe a television, a universe whose rules the mass murderer must obey.

COMMENTARY: Horror maestro Wes Craven’s *Shocker* is a rollicking horror satire packed with laughs and shivers. It’s designed for a single, grand purpose: to introduce the world to another horror franchise and signature boogeyman *a la* Freddy Krueger. Although *Shocker* ultimately failed to make Horace Pinker (played by *The X-Files*’ Mitch Pileggi!) a household name, that doesn’t mean the film doesn’t merit serious hosannas for its efforts, particularly its break-neck pace and roller-coaster-like ride through the terrain of TV.

Looking at *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Shocker* back to back, one can detect that Wes Craven has his own unique prototype for creating franchises. On the one hand, the template worked, and yet here, it did not. Both films, audiences may note, commence inside the filthy workshop of a deranged murderer, and involve the creation of his distinctive weapon of mass destruction. In Freddy’s case, that armament is the famous glove with razor blade fingers; in Pinker’s case, the weapon is an array of TV sets which ostensibly receive

broadcasts straight from Hell.

Like Freddy, Pinker is also physically distinctive. In keeping with the slasher film paradigm (but modified to incorporate rubber reality), this is a necessity. A uniform, mask, costume or individual look must always separate the killer from his (preferably teen) victim base. Instead of being a burn victim in fashionable fedora and ratty sweater, like Krueger, *Shocker*'s antagonist sports a terrible limp, the result of an old gunshot wound, and a chrome-dome top that makes him resemble Mr. Clean.

The protagonists in both *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Shocker* also share some important qualities. Both Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) and Jonathan Parker (Peter Berg) are the children of local police lieutenants named Donald (Don Parker in *Shocker*; Don Thompson in *Elm Street*). Also, the protagonists in both cases are the only people who are aware of the killer's identity, and share a strange bond with him on the landscape of dreams. Nancy and Jonathan are connected to their respective bogeymen not only through dreams, but a special personal relationship. In Nancy's case, she is the daughter of the folks who torched Freddy. Jonathan, by contrast, is the murderer's biological son, the very one who wounded him. In both cases, revenge becomes an issue. The sins of the father are visited upon the daughter in *Elm Street*, and the son is punished for his transgression in *Shocker*.

It's fascinating to watch an accomplished director return to a form he has perfected (in this case, the rubber-reality horror film) and judge him on consistency, innovation and modifications in existing ingredients. But *Shocker*'s wholesale aping of *Elm Street* ultimately costs the newer film a heavy price. For much of *Shocker*'s overly long running time, the picture feels like a retread, like ground that Craven has covered before, and better. In the final analysis, what rescues *Shocker* from the label of "been there, done that" is Craven's all-out effort to go for laughs. This humor is best displayed in two pivotal scenes.

The first occur in an idyllic park. Jonathan is chased by the deceased Pinker, who can hop bodies and now inhabits the form of a cop. Pinker is so determined to catch his quarry that he draws innocent bystanders into the pursuit, and possesses their bodies, with increasingly funny results. The ridiculous and hysterical punchline of this scene finds Pinker inhabiting the body of a cute-as-a-button, six-year-old girl.

Displaying Pinker's tell-tale limp (the only way to recognize the killer

when he leaps from person to person), this little darling attacks Jonathan with a vengeance, even spitting in his face. It's an over-the-top wicked moment. However, it's *logical* because the events grow believably out of the situation, and it's funny, because—to the outside world—Jonathan looks like the aggressor! He's wrestling and attacking that little kid!

The second bit of sustained humor occurs in the over-the-top, trip-within-a-trip, roller-coaster finale. In a spellbinding montage that highlights rapid-fire editing and amazing pre-*Forrest Gump*-style special effects, and even footage from *Leave It to Beaver* and *Frankenstein*, Jonathan chases Pinker through the perilous terrain of the TV landscape. What the hero and Pinker discover as they “channel-surf” is an overwhelming universe of choices that neither is prepared to cope with. At one point, Parker begs “the Beaver” to help him, but the Cleavers forge blissfully onward in the family car.

The humor in this final chase is derived not just from the seamless blending of *Shocker* characters with TV icons and film clips, but through other carefully staged vignettes. At one critical juncture, Pinker and Jonathan jump out of the TV world and into the living room of some overweight couch potatoes. The family is hardly alarmed by the presence of the strangers, and its members continue to eat junk food. Craven’s point, it seems, is that TV makes zombies of Americans. Even this new form of “interactive TV” (people jumping out of the screen) is merely more “bread and circuses” for the masses. Thus Craven joins Tobe Hooper (*Poltergeist*) and John Carpenter (*They Live*) in critiquing television in one of his 1980s horrors.

Another vignette finds Pinker and Jonathan battling within inches of *Entertainment Tonight* reporter and anchorman, John Tesh, who is nearly drawn into combat himself as his perfectly stacked notes are scattered across his desk. Tesh is a likable, often derided TV personality, and this scene demonstrates his willingness to be a target of fun.

When Pinker and Jonathan arrive at Timothy Leary’s evangelical TV program, Craven’s satire reaches its full power. Leary begs his audience to send more money for God, a joke reflecting Oral Roberts’ *faux pas* in January of 1987, when he told his viewers that “God” would call him “home” if he didn’t raise nearly five million dollars in three months. “I need some very quick money ... I need it now,” Roberts told everyone out in TV land. Leary is good during this gag, and it’s ironic that *Shocker*’s TV evangelist has rung up not the Supreme Being, but rather a demon like Pinker.

In toto, *Shocker*'s go-for-broke, over-the-top, caution-to-the-wind final montage suggests TV as a portal of evil. Carried on the airwaves, Pinker is granted instant access not just to Elm Street, but to all of America ... simultaneously. Craven's theme about the insidious nature of the boob tube is definitely an echo of *Poltergeist*, but his final comment is that TV is not just evil, it is actually all-consuming.

Forget Horace Pinker; television is the national bogeyman. It is so cutthroat a medium that it devours every personality who dares enter it. Once he jumps into the world of TV, Pinker is bound by its rules, and therefore he can be manipulated by others, including Jonathan. This is a subtle reminder by Craven that public, televised downfalls were the biggest item on the national menu in the late 1980s. From Ronald Reagan and his Iran-Contra mea culpa to Oral Roberts, to Jimmy Swaggart's confession, to Oliver North, to Gary Hart, to Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, television at that time in American history was setting up "heroes" and then knocking them down like bowling pins. Pinker travels the same course in *Shocker*, only literally. TV grants him power, and then it takes away his power. End of story.

In *Shocker*, Pinker is finally killed by the boob tube. The serial killer attempts to re-enter television, but finds the medium unwilling to accept him this time around. Consequently, his head smashes through the screen and he is electrocuted. This is a death that pointedly suggests the fickle nature of TV audiences, something that Kirstie Alley (loved her in *Cheers*; hated her in *Fat Actress*), Geena Davis (loved in her in *Commander in Chief*, then hated her in it), and other performers may well understand. At a much more basic level, Pinker's national reign of terror ends only when TV sets are turned off. That's something that—as a nation—Americans seem unwilling to do.

In some senses, *Shocker* is tiresome in its over-reliance on the heavily mined landscape of rubber-reality dreams. But even if certain moments sag from repetition and melodrama, the film really hits its stride by the end of the final act. Craven has made better movies, but there's a gonzo, high-voltage energy and sting to *Shocker* that will give you a jolt.

Silent Night, Deadly Night 3: Better Watch Out!



CAST: Richard Beymer (Dr. Newbury); Bill Moseley (Ricky Caldwell); Samantha Scully (Laura Anderson); Eric Da Rae (Chris); Laura Herring (Jerri); Elizabeth Hoffman (Granny); Robert Culp (Lt. Connelly); Melissa Hellman (Dr. Newbury's Assistant); Leonard Mann (Laura's Psychiatrist); Jim Ladd (Newscaster); Marc Dietrich (Gas Station Attendant); Michael Ameen (Coroner).

CREW: Quest Films Presents an Arthur H. Gorson Production, a Monte Hellman Film. *Co-Producer*: Patricia Foulkrod. *Associate Producer*: Ed Rothkowicz. *Film Editor*: Ed Rothkowicz. *Special Makeup Effects*: Nina Kraft. *Casting*: Kimba Hills. *Music*: Steven Soles. *Director of Photography*: Josep M. Civit. *Executive Producers*: Ronna Wallace, Richard N. Gladstein. *Producer*: Arthur H. Gorson. *Ricky's Brain Designed by*: Philip Thomas. *Brain Construction*: David Miller. *Directed by*: Monte Hellman. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: “There are no innocent people, lieutenant. We’re all guilty. Guilty of being stupid, irrational, doomed and badly designed. No, science is the only way to restore our innocence. Ricky isn’t a killer ... he’s a way to *stop killing*.”—Dr. Newbury (Richard Beymer) waxes philosophic while Lt. Connelly (Robert Culp) listens, in *Silent Night, Deadly Night 3: Better Watch Out!*

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Newbury (Beymer) utilizes the dreams of a blind girl named Laura Anderson (Scully) to contact the mind of the brain-dead Santa Claus Killer, Ricky Caldwell (Moseley). He is successful, and Ricky awakens from a coma, kills a hospital receptionist and follows Laura on her Christmas vacation. Unaware of the danger, Laura, her brother, Chris (Da Rae), and his girlfriend Jerri (Herring) arrive at Grandma’s house only to find the kindly old woman (Hoffman) missing—and presumed dead. As Ricky stalks the trio, Lt. Connelly (Culp) and Dr. Newbury follow leads on the highway to locate the mass murderer, who is easily recognizable from the strange brain-cap he wears. As Ricky kills and kills again, Laura experiences a psychic vision of her Granny, who tells her she has the power to defeat evil.

COMMENTARY: “Do you know what you call it when you have *deja vu* twice?” one character asks another in *Silent Night, Deadly Night 3: Better Watch Out!* The answer? “Yeah, *stupid!*”

Well, this film, better titled *Silent Night, Deadly Dull*, is indeed an answer as to what happens when you have *deja vu* twice: It’s just *stupid*. And it’s easy to see why one might suffer from *deja vu* while viewing director Monte Hellman’s work, for once more some clever producer has seen fit to cut in footage from *Silent Night Deadly Night*

that viewers have already seen repeated in the atrocious previous installment of the series. This is the third time such footage appears in a *Silent Night, Deadly Night* film in three films.

But then, much of this movie insults the intelligence. The plot involves the resurrection of the (second) Santa Claus Killer, Ricky Caldwell. He was played in *Silent Night, Deadly Night 2* by the obnoxious Eric Freeman. He's been replaced by Bill Moseley, the talented genre icon who has appeared in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1987), *Night of the Living Dead* (1990), *Army of Darkness* (1993), *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil's Rejects* (2005). So automatically, this film should be an improvement, right? Well, unfortunately that's just not the case. Poor Moseley—the actor who tore up the scenery as Chop Top in *TCM 2*—is strait-jacketed (literally) into a role where he is merely a shambling, Michael Myers-type killer with no personality and no sense of vigor.

The producers humiliate the actor by making the character of Ricky don a really stupid-looking bowl over his exposed brain. Every now and then, we see some muddy red fluid floating around, but for the most part it looks like someone just welded a McDonald's plastic salad bowl rim cover over the actor's head and attached it to his skin with some metal and screws. It's a truly embarrassing prop, and makes for a ridiculous, comic effect that removes any possibility of being scared by the film's purportedly menacing antagonist.

To generate the necessary scares, *Silent Night, Deadly Night 3* would need to weave a fabric of reality, one that we could all relate to and identify with. We'd have to see characters that we like and care about, facing a terrible confrontation. That's the key to a good jump and to building suspense—a sense of involvement and, if not belief, then at least suspension of disbelief. But the film can't achieve that because it is, on the surface, utterly ridiculous. For instance, early in the film, there is a long shot of the brain-exposed Ricky walking in plain daylight down a busy California freeway. Nobody notices him? Nobody thinks this guy with the pulsating brain cap is a little ... different? Nope, of course not. He just shambles his way up the highway, until a passing car picks him up as a hitchhiker.

The screenplay is just unremittingly stupid. "He's a victim of coma," one character says of Ricky. A victim of coma? Do comas really take victims? And don't even get me started on the philosophical conversations undertaken by poor Robert Culp (what is he doing here?) and Richard Beymer while they drive up to the Anderson orange grove. Much screen time is spent while they discuss the uses

and benefits of having a car phone.

Historically, *Silent Night, Deadly Night* 3 is indicative of two important 1980s horror movie trends. The first is the “sequel but no equal” paradigm prevalent at the time, revealing how a once-solid movie franchise falters badly with each successive release until it lapses into total and utter embarrassment. *Slumber Party Massacre* did it. *Poltergeist* did it. And so did *Silent Night, Deadly Night*.

Perhaps more interesting than the law of diminishing returns, however, is the fact that this is the first film in the *Silent Night, Deadly Night* series to purposefully stray into the land of “rubber reality.” Remember, the first film concerned a mad-dog killer-type on a spree. Give or take some facile psychology, it appeared to occur in the “real” world.

But given the popularity of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and its offshoots, *Silent Night, Deadly Night* 3’s producers choose a different template here: Ricky and the blind Laura share a psychic bond on the dreamscape, and at critical moments Laura is able to receive information from her “crossed-over” Grandma. Again, this movement away from reality and into the supernatural was a symptom of the late 1980s. Jason Voorhees also became a supernatural entity as *Friday the 13th* continued endlessly, revived by lightning in one installment (*Jason Lives*), and fighting a Carrie-like character in another (*The New Blood*). Even reliable old Michael Myers saw rubber-reality and the supernatural invade his world of Haddonfield in 1989, when his niece Jamie (Danielle Harris) developed a psychic bond with him for *Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers*. Yet another franchise that went all rubbery-reality was *Slumber Party Massacre*, boasting a sequel with a supernatural killer built from nightmares. The message of all these shifts from reality to the paranormal was that regular slashers were played out on film. For a series to sustain interest, a more supernatural overlay had to be applied. Fortunately, in most cases, it was done with more aplomb than in *Silent Night, Deadly Night* 3.

This is a terrible film, make no mistake, but even in its total rottenness, there is something positive one can say. Samantha Scully, who plays Laura Anderson, is a beautiful actress, and she gives a solid, believable performance amidst the dreck. It would be nice to see what this actress is capable of when vetting better material and working under the guidance of a better director. I’ve never seen her in another film.

Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland



Cast and Crew

CAST: Pamela Springsteen (Angela); Tracy Griffith (Marcia); Mark Oliver (Tony); Kim Wall (Cindy); Kyle Holman (Snowboy); Daryl Wilcher (Riff); Michael J. Pollard (Herman); Sandra Dorsey (Lilly); Cliff Branch (Barney); Kashina Kessler (Maria); Randi Layne (Tawny); Chung Ven Tsay (Greg); Sonya Maddox (Anita); Stacie Lambert (Jan); Jill Terashita (Araib); Charles Lawlor (Paramedic); Jerry Griffin (Policeman); Mike Nagel (Ambulance Driver).

CREW: Stan Wakefield presents a Double Helix Films Production of a Michael A. Simpson Film. *Executive Producer:* Stan Wakefield. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Michael Hitchcock. *Casting:* Shay Griffin. *Special Makeup Effects:* Bill Johnson. *Film Editors:* Amy Carey, John David Allen. *Music:* James Oliverio. *Director of Photography:* Bill Mills. *Written by:* Fritz Gordon. *Based on an original idea by:* Robert Hiltzik. *Associate Producer:* Bob Phillips. *Produced by:* Jerry Silva, Michael A. Simpson. *Directed by:* Michael A. Sampson. *MPAA Rating:* No rating. *Running time:* 76 minutes.

INCANTATION: “I’ve never chopped wood before ... but I’ve chopped other things.”—A near slip up from “Angel of Death” Angela (Pamela Springsteen) in the third *Sleepaway Camp* movie, *Teenage Wasteland*.

SYNOPSIS: A year after her slaughter of nineteen at another camp, “angel of death” Angela Baker (Springsteen) assumes the identity of another teen camper, Maria, and heads off to a three-day “experiment in sharing” at Camp New Horizons. The camp is a blend of rich and poor kids, but Angela sees all of ‘em as potential prey. She kills them in various sadistic ways, including bludgeoning, lawn mower, and traditional axing.

COMMENTARY: Wasteland is right! *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland*, a direct-to-video release, is an utter waste of the horror aficionado’s time. The amateurishness of the production is almost too great to contemplate, but I would be remiss if I didn’t mention it.

In a few early scenes, the actors line up against a wall, looking confused and aimless. Apparently, it would have been too much trouble for the director to block them.

Sleepaway Camp III’s production is so cheap that when a young

character with a boom box turns on his tunes, it's always the same exact drum-roll, and one that sounds suspiciously like a pre-programmed riff you find on a synthesizer. This "tune" is played at least four times in the film.

Pamela Springsteen plays Angela, our *femme fatale* with a total lack of presence. Not a minimal presence, mind you, but an absence of one. The actress listlessly and without menace delivers the requisite *bon mots* ("It's a good thing you're dead, because in a few years, your breasts would have been sagging something horrible") without even a touch of flair or excitement. Let alone inflection.

Finally, this movie fails to generate a single scare or even one instant of suspense. Of course, one realizes that a film like this is supposed to be "campy" and filled with ridiculous humor (like the scene wherein an obnoxious woman counselor is run over with a lawn mower), but *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* doesn't even embody much of a sense of humor, and certainly not when one considers the *truly* funny horror movies of the decade (*Evil Dead II*, *Critters*, *Return of the Living Dead*).

If your idea of seeing something funny is watching Michael J. Pollard attempt to have sex in a tent with an underage camper, then maybe this movie will be to your liking. It's sure a long way from *Bonnie & Clyde*. The entertainment value of *Sleepaway Camp III* is nil, but the historical value may be high: This direct-to-video effort reveals how a "brand name" horror franchise of even marginal quality (like *Sleepaway Camp* or *Silent Night Deadly Night*) had a leg up in the marketing department of video stores. A brand name could make the difference between a rental or a pass.

In this case, I recommend you pass.

Society

★ ★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Billy Warlock (Billy Whitney); Devin Devasquez (Clarisa); Evan Richards (Milo); Ben Meyerson (Ferguson); Charles Lucia (Jim); Connie Danese (Nan); Patrice Jennings (Jenny); Heidi Kozak (Shanna); Ben Slack (Dr. Cleveland); Tim Bartell (Blanchard); Brian Bromer (Petrie); Maria Claire (Sally); Conan Yuzna (Jason); Pamela Matheson (Mrs. Caryln); David Wiley (Judge Carter); Mike Diamant (Cop in

Woods); David Wells (Sgt. Burt).

CREW: Wild Street Pictures Presents a Keith Walley-Paul White Production of a Brian Yuzna Film. *Casting:* Donna Anderson. *Surrealistic Makeup Effects by:* Screaming Mad George. *Music Composed by:* Mark Ryder, Phil Davies. *Production Designer:* Matthew C. Jacobs. *Film Editor:* Peter Teschner. *Director of Photography:* Rick Fichter. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Dean Ramser. *Executive Producers:* Paul White, Keizo Kabatas, Terry Ogisu. *Written by:* Woody Keith, Rick Fry. *Produced by:* Keith Walley. *Directed by:* Brian Yuzna. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Billy Whitney (Warlock), an athletic jock running for class president at the prestigious Beverly Hills Academy, is shocked to learn from a fellow student and his sister's former boyfriend, Blanchard (Bartell), that his adopted parents and sibling are apparently engaged in deviant sexual activities together. Worse, the most popular kid at school, Ferguson (Meyerson), claims that he had sex with Whitney's sister Jenny (Jennings) at her coming-out party ... and that everybody else there did too!

When Blanchard is apparently murdered for passing on this secret information, Billy seeks the counsel of his psychiatrist, Dr. Cleveland (Slack), who recommends medication. But Billy isn't so easily dissuaded from his investigation and learns that Beverly Hills society, led by Judge Carter (Wiley), is actually composed of inhuman slug creatures who feed on human beings. He also learns that this society has a horrible plan for him. His only hope of survival rests with the beautiful Clarisa (Devasquez), who may have a secret of her own.

COMMENTARY: By the end of the 1980s, horror movies were more frequently and more openly criticizing the extravagances of the 1980s. *They Live* (1988) focused on the swelling ranks of the poor and homeless, and posited the satirical idea that yuppies are actually alien Republicans. From a similar school arrives Brian Yuzna's *Society*, a special effects-heavy film that suggests class warfare of a compatible stripe: the notion that the rich are actually inhuman monsters feeding on those in our society who are less fortunate. In *They Live*, the m.o. is that the offending aliens utilize business and greed (and a hypnotic TV signal) to control the planet. Even that filter is absent in *Society*: Here the rich *literally* eat the poor. They are a different breed altogether ... but since they're rich, they can make the rules.

What also differentiates *Society* from *They Live* is the core nature of this narrative. At its heart, Yuzna's picture functions as a teenage,

coming-of-age story, rather than as a mobilizing wake-up call for leftist revolution. To wit, it involves one unlucky kid, Billy Whitley (played by Billy Warlock), who discovers that his (adopted) family is downright inhuman. This is a fun metaphor for our reality, because as adolescents become adults, they're inevitably asked to integrate into a society that they didn't make and aren't responsible for perpetuating. Yet they inherit the Earth, the family fortune, the business, and all the old generation's problems. There will *always* be that percentage of people who don't assimilate or conform to society's expectations.

These rebels may be cast as outsiders or agitators, but in the case of *Society*, their rebellion is incontrovertibly a good thing since the "aliens" who rule society are monsters. They're inappropriately sexual with one another, boast disgusting elastic bodies (a joke, perhaps, about plastic surgery), and they devour human beings. They're vultures too, literally sitting on the top of the food chain. "The rich have always sucked off low-class shit like you," one of the villains says, and his point is both literal and metaphorical.

Part of Billy's coming of age involves a sexual awakening of a sort. He has a very attractive adopted sister (and the movie pauses to grant her a bizarre and disturbing shower scene), and he probably has some deep, subconscious lust for her even though he knows it is wrong to feel such things for a family member. But then, to his horror, Whitley learns the dark secret of his family—that his parents and his sister are engaging in sex together. The rules which "guide" him don't apply to the rich, for society folk.

Still, his family wants him involved in this perversion. "You'll do our whole family ... proud," he hears from the parents, and the placement of a pause in that sentence indicates something really, really sick.

However, that's always the thing about the ruling class. *Hypocrisy*. The rich like to enforce moral codes on others, but what's good for them is an entirely different matter, isn't it? When it comes down to it, many wealthy people deny themselves no desire, no decadence (witness the alleged excesses of Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski in 2001: \$6,000 shower curtains and a \$15,000 umbrella stand), and that's the immoral world that Billy stumbles across in the film. It's a world that viewers in the 1980s would have been familiar with, given Ivan Boesky and the fictional Gordon Gekko.

What remains most illuminating about this film is that—like the best episodes of *The Twilight Zone*—*Society* begins with everyday reality, the notion that a teen's life feels abnormal, and that he makes a

shocking discovery. The family secret isn't incest, child molestation, or rape, but the fact that his family unit is an entirely different breed.

At the same time *Society* meditates on the idea of a monstrous ruling class feeding on the rest of America, it's also another 1980s meditation about the sick underside of American family, also the terrain of *The Stepfather* (1987) and *Parents* (1989), to name just two other contemporary films. This is another expression of the "don't worry be happy/be afraid," be very afraid concept. On the surface in *Society*, everything is good. People are rich and comfortable and seemingly happy. But underneath, something sick wriggles and twists and distorts American values. The shunting—the ritual in which the monsters show their bizarre forms—is a literal reading of the Janus-like duality of the 1980s. A happy, seemingly normal surface is cast off to reveal perversion and decadence (like a father figure who has a face on his buttocks).

At times, *Society*'s paranoia trip is fascinating, but at other times the movie seems to hit the brakes in its forward momentum to show off its then-remarkable (now iffy) special effects sequences. Also, in the climax, Billy wins an easy victory over his inhuman nemeses, and that's just wrong in conspiracy movies such as this. Everybody knows that in the end, society *always* wins. If this film had been crafted in the 1970s, the climax would have probably been entirely different, much more nihilistic in nature, but that's not the case here. So *Society* ends on an optimistic note, but one that's unwarranted given its debate about the nature of the enemy, a "members only" breed who demand you are "born" into its ranks. As the movie points out, these creatures can trace their lineage back to Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan. So it's not likely that the 1980s equivalent of a James Dean is going to beat them at a game they perfected long, long ago.

Spontaneous Combustion

★ ★

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brad Dourif (David "Sam" Bell); Cynthia Bain (Lisa); Jon Cypher (Dr. Marsh); William Prince (Lew Orlander); Melinda Dillon (Nina); Dey Young (Rachel); Tegan West (Springer); Michael Keys Hall (Dr. Cagney); Dale Dye (General); Dick Butkus (Lieutenant General); Joe Mays (Dr. Persons); Stacy Edwards (Peggy Bell); Brian Bremer (Brian Bell); Frank Whitman (Young Orlander); Judy Prescott (Student

Director); Judy Behr (School Nurse); Betsy Thomas (Nurse at Hospital); John Landis (Radio Technician); Jamie Alba (Waiter); Mark Roberts (Dr. Simpson); Richard Warlock (Mr. Fitzpatrick); Judith Jones (Jennifer); Bill Forward (Scientist); George "Buck" Flower (Preacher on the Radio).

CREW: Tobe Hooper-Henry Bushkin present a Jim Rogers production of a Tobe Hooper film. *Casting:* Carol Lewis. *Production Design:* Gene Abel. *Stunt Coordinators:* Greg Gault, Rick Barker. *Special Makeup Effects:* Steve Neill. *Pyrotechnic Effects:* Guy Faria. *Special Visual Effects produced at:* Apogee Productions, Inc. *Special Effects Consultant:* John Dykstra. *Executive Producers:* Henry Bushkin, Arthur Sarkissian. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Special Visual Effects:* Stephen Brooks. *Film Editor:* David Kern. *Director of Photography:* Levie Isaacks. *Associate Producer:* Sanford Hampton. *Co-Produced by:* Jerryld W. Lambert. *Story by:* Tobe Hooper. *Screenplay by:* Tobe Hooper, Howard Goldberg. *Produced by:* Jim Rogers. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* No rating. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young couple, the Bells, are exposed to the H-Bomb called "Samson" during a test in the Nevada desert in 1955. Nine months later, Mrs. Peggy Bell gives birth to young David (Dourif), or "Sam," but shortly thereafter both she and her husband die during a terrifying incident of spontaneous combustion. By the 1980s, David is a grown divorcee, and begins to evidence the power to burn up his enemies, even over vast distances or across phone lines. David learns about his secret heritage; that his girlfriend, Lisa, is of similar genetics; and that they are being groomed and controlled by the military. David decides he wants a different fate than that.

COMMENTARY: Tobe Hooper's *Spontaneous Combustion* commences on a high note of creativity and wit, but then promptly goes down in flames. Like his best filmed work (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*), this effort relies strongly on the director's *outré* sense of humor. And like his weakest efforts (*Night Terrors*, *The Mangler*), *Spontaneous Combustion* features a muddy, confusing narrative and some stiff, uninteresting characters. Hooper—a movie brat and thus a nostalgia buff for the 1950s era—clearly has a ball in *Spontaneous Combustion* by ribbing that decade's sense of naiveté regarding the dangers of atomic power. He does so in a splendid, humorous and perfectly pitched prologue. Considering this strong start, the film often evokes the pleasant feeling of an Eisenhower era sci-fi B picture such as Bert I. Gordon's *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957). Yet for an artist who began his film career in the 1970s by revolutionizing the genre and giving the savage cinema a *cause célèbre*, this project remains rather

innocuous, and therefore, something of a disappointment.

Yet *Spontaneous Combustion* begins with a bang. Literally. Rippling balls of flame flower across the screen between opening title cards, and the raw, powerful nature of fire is dramatized. How beautiful fire can be, and how dangerous too, one is tempted to muse at this point. That's some marvelous terrain to open a horror film on, and a chance to improve on the flawed Stephen King adaptation, *Firestarter*.

This potential is upheld immediately, as the film follows the events surrounding an H-Bomb test at dawn one day in 1955. This portion of the film turns into a delightful 1950s-era propaganda short “educational” film (like the kind often featured in America’s high schools). This short concerns America’s first “nuclear family,” Brian and Peggy Bell, and it is here that Hooper’s satiric genius, his pervasive and subversive sense of humor, combines with his skill as a “documentary”-style filmmaker to make the moment special.

The audience watches oblivious *Ozzie and Harriet* types Brian and Peg hunker down in their deluxe, government-constructed bomb shelter (helpfully equipped with seven days of provisions!) as the military detonates the A-bomb, code-named Samson. As the propaganda film continues, depicting the preparations of the young married couple for their stay in bunker, it joyfully and enthusiastically glosses over the dangers involved in this unusual enterprise. The blindly patriotic, naive and optimistic texture of the conservative 1950s is humorously and brilliantly expressed. Hooper makes audiences laugh and gasp at the same time, and his ironic use of “I Don’t Want to Set the World on Fire” over the H-bomb test is a masterstroke.

The writing is good here too. The H-Bomb is euphemistically categorized as a “new tool” given to mankind, and the reinforced shelter is “guaranteed to take the anxiety out of the atomic age!” This super-strong shelter (“That’s how we build it in the USA!”) can “really take it!” (meaning an atomic blast).

These ridiculous, horn-blowing statements about American superiority are voiced in upbeat, breathless narration over black-and-white documentary-like footage, and artfully reveal the government and military’s hypocrisy. Propaganda promises that Americans will survive and flourish in a nuclear bombardment when—as the “test” couple soon learns so dramatically—nothing could be further from the truth.

Since the 1980s is, from a certain perspective, the 1950s redux, *Spontaneous Combustion*, its naive couple, and the training film

represent a fascinating comment on the Reagan era and the resurgent “new patriotism” of the time. Self-professed patriotism apparently requires a lack of critical thinking too, the filmmakers seem to state here, as all that *really* matters are America’s trumpet-blaring ingenuity and flag-waving. “Facts are stupid things,” President Reagan once famously opined—though he meant to say that they are “stubborn” things—and indeed, facts can get in the way of pursuing an agenda. Like the fact, that in the 1950s, “duck and cover” wasn’t a good technique to survive an atom bomb detonation.

In the 1980s, similarly absurd statements like Reagan’s (incorrect) assertion that nuclear missiles could be recalled from submarines once fired, also belied the truth of that matter. But the comment certainly made people *feel* safe. It’s that duality we’ve seen all through the 1980s: Truth and the image existed in nearly separate universes.

Despite the ingenuity of *Spontaneous Combustion*’s early scenes, the film sacrifices every grain of narrative clarity once it arrives in the present. The characters are not even introduced adequately, leaving audiences confused. The restaurant scene in which Sam’s ex-wife tells him of Amy Whittaker’s unusual death (by spontaneous combustion) is the most notable example of this failing. At this point, the audience has no idea who Amy Whittaker is, why she is important, or how she is related to Sam.

Another poorly conceived sequence involves Sam’s flashbacks. The events he recalls actually occurred when his mom was still carrying Sam in her womb. That’s incredibly silly and nearly as ridiculous as the scene in Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (1985) wherein a dog experiences a flashback to events from the 1977 original *Hills* film.

The longer *Spontaneous Combustion* remains in the 1980s, the more unsatisfactory the film becomes. Particularly amusing is the moment when Sam’s girlfriend (a snitch) reports to Lew Orlander, the mastermind of the movie’s evil conspiracy, that Sam just telephoned, “and fire came out of the phone.” That’s the kind of ridiculous dialogue you don’t hear in movies every day.

Following the impressive, ten-minute opening sequence set in 1955, there appears to be precious little else to enjoy, let alone comprehend in Hooper’s confusing *Spontaneous Combustion*. There have been allegations about constant rewriting on the set, as well as other issues involving creative interference, so perhaps it isn’t surprising that the film fails to impress. Hooper has certainly made better films (even in the 1980s), but he’s rarely made one worse.

The Stepfather 2: Make Room for Daddy

★ ★ ★

Critical Reception

“This is an effective but unspectacular recapitulation ... the tone is of knowing humor and the kind of irony ... unique to sequels calculatedly aware of their predecessor’s achievements. Nevertheless, O’Quinn’s sinister performance is continually interesting.”—Robert Cettl, *Serial Killer Cinema: An Analytical Filmography*, McFarland and Company, 2003, page 434.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Terry O’Quinn (Jerry Blake/Gene Clifford); Meg Foster (Carol Grayland); Caroline Williams (Matty Crimmins); Jonathan Brandis (Todd Grayland); Henry Brown (Dr. Joseph Danvers); Mitchell Laurence (Phil Grayland); Miriam Byrd-Nethery (Sally); Leon Martell (Smitty); Renata Scott (Betty Willis); John O’Leary (Sam Walkins); Glen Adams (Salesman); Eric Brown (Hotel Attendant).

CREW: *Presented by:* ITC Entertainment Group. *Casting:* Rosemary Welken. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *In association with:* Pat Regan. *Film Editor:* Pasquale A. Buba. *Production Design:* Byrnadette Cisanto. *Director of Photography:* Jacek Laskus. *Stunt Coordinator:* Gary Jensen. *Executive Producer:* Carol Lampman. *Based on Characters created by:* Carolyn Lefcourt, Brian Garfield, Donald E. Westlake. *Produced by:* Darin Scott, William Burr. *Written by:* John Auerbach. *Directed by:* Jeff Burr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Jerry Blake (O’Quinn), the so-called “Bad Father” Murderer, has been incarcerated in Puget Sound Psychiatric Hospital in Washington, where his new therapist Dr. Danvers (Brown) begins to trust him ... too much. Jerry kills the doctor and a guard and escapes. He moves to a suburban community called Palm Meadows and assumes the identity of a dead man named Gene Clifford. Pretending to be a therapist, Jerry/Gene convenes a group for troubled housewives while secretly shopping for a new spouse and family.

He courts the lovely (and lonely) Carol Grayland (Foster) and befriends her son, Todd (Brandis). When Carol’s errant husband returns to make amends with Carol, Jerry/Gene reverts to his old

ways and murders him, dumping his body in an auto junkyard. When Carol's best friend begins to suspect Gene, he must off her too. On his wedding day, a specific bottle of wine and a whistled tune ("Camptown Races") give the stepfather away.

COMMENTARY: You have to feel a little bit sorry for Jerry Blake (or is it Gene Clifford?), the character portrayed so ably by Terry O'Quinn in *The Stepfather 2: Make Room for Daddy*, a sequel to the surprise horror hit of 1987. After all, as we have seen in the original film, this is a traditional man with traditional values, weaned on *Father Knows Best*, Leave it to Beaver and other television series that portrayed an unattainably perfect family life.

And now this fellow is thrust full-on into the dating scene of the 1980s. After he chooses his new home from a game show called *Dream House*, he begins looking for a spouse and with the help of a video dating service, screens the applicants. They're a pretty sad bunch, at least if you're a conservative traditional-type who likes things the way they used to be. One prospective wife is typically 1980s in that she's overtly materialistic, more interested in a four carat diamond rock for her ring finger than in preparing a home-cooked meal for her husband. The next woman is too sexually aggressive for the old-fashioned Gene, and goes right into a descriptive analysis of diaphragm use. She's just too modern. And then the third applicants just cares about her career and states flat out that it comes first.

The traditional patriarchal society of America was coming to an end in the 1980s, with more women in the work force than ever before, and men like O'Quinn, who had been raised to believe in the old values were just out of step. Of course, this doesn't excuse murder, but the sequel to *The Stepfather* works surprisingly well and shows very little thematic drift from the original material because, like the 1980s sequels to *Psycho*, it boasts an element of compassion and sympathy for the murderous lead character. There are times when Gene is gentle, loving and decent. Of course, those times are countered by his murderous rages. We all long for perfection in our family lives, I suppose, and for parts of the film, one is actually rooting for O'Quinn to outsmart his nosy neighbors, and more to the point, find that elusive perfect family that will end the necessity of committing murder.

Of course, no human can be perfect. No wife is ideal. No child is without flaws and foibles. Perfection can't be attained, but that can't stop a guy like Gene from having standards, can it? Gene tells his psychiatrist, Dr. Danvers, that he is "the eternal optimist." He believes

he can fix whatever's broken, so he's going to keep trying. Who can't respect a guy like that?

The Stepfather 2 is nimble and entertaining because it focuses most of its time not on the new family, but squarely on the title character, and as audiences learned in the original, he's not perfect. In the climax of the first film, he forgot what his alias was, and in the sequel, his trademark whistle to "Camptown Races" reveals that he was Matty's murderer. Again, this just makes the guy that much more human and likable (away from the trend of most 1980s slasher films). He makes foolish mistakes and exposes himself, but that doesn't mean he's going to stop trying to find that perfect family!

IV

A Conclusion to *Horror Films of the 1980s:* The Nineties Loom

Thus ended the 1980s, a decade of sweeping change in America. By decade's close, the Soviet Union was consigned to the dustbin of history and George Bush's "new world order" reigned. At home, the American economy sputtered and the storm clouds of recession gathered. Words like "downsizing" and "outsourcing" were about to enter the American vocabulary.

Horror movies at the end of the eighties were also at a crossroads. There had been a whopping thirty percent more horror films produced in the decade of Reagan than in the one before and it was a decade of repetition and more repetition. In the glut of sequels, Stephen King adaptations and direct-to-video releases, there seemed fewer real jewels amidst the dross.

By the time the eighties rode into the sunset with former President Reagan, horror movies had oversaturated the theatrical and home video markets with more of the same. In 1989, the dependable Freddy (*A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child*) and Jason (*Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan*) fell before cinematic heroes like Batman and Indiana Jones; both horror franchises attempted gimmicks to re-invent themselves in the 1990s. Jason miraculously found the power to hop from body to body (like Horace Pinker) in *Jason Goes to Hell* and Freddy tried to entice fans back to theaters with the gimmick of 3-D. Michael Myers did not return to Haddonfield (or the box office) until 1996's *Curse of Michael Myers*. The slasher reign was over.

And what would replace the slasher paradigm of the 1980s? With films like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Copycat* (1995) and *Seven* (1995), the 1990s saw an increased concentration on more realistic slashers, or more accurately serial killers. These were villains who could be killed and didn't wear masks.

If the faceless slasher was the great monster of Reagan's decade, the

charismatic reality-based serial killer, the Hannibal Lector or Catherine Trammell became the star of Clinton's reign. Although it's tempting to look at the shift from faceless killers to more human ones as a sign that audiences were seeking more depth in horror movies, the reason behind this sea change probably had more to do with the excessive repetition of the slasher formula in the 1980s and boogeyman fatigue.



The nineties saw an increased popularity in horror TV series, from *The X-Files* (1996–2002) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) to *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–96), pictured here.

Horror movies in the 1990s would also face another threat in the age of Clinton. The ever-increasing popularity of cable television and anthology programs such as HBO's *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–96) meant that more gore (and intensity) could be dramatized on the tube than ever before.

In 1993, Chris Carter presented *The X-Files*, a monster-of-the-week updating of the old *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974) formula, and it became the most popular TV series of the decade. For its first three years, *The X-Files* also aired on Friday nights at 9:00 pm, the very time youngsters should have been heading off to the theater to see the

weekend's new slasher film. Instead, they could stay home and be scared for free; and usually more adroitly than any low-budget film could manage.



Many of the popular movie franchises of the 1980s continued well into the 1990s, including *Child's Play*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and the sequel to *Aliens*, pictured here: *Alien 3* (1992), directed by David Fincher and starring a shorn Sigourney Weaver.

The success of *The X-Files* set off a boom of horror TV programming. *Millennium* (1996–98), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Poltergeist: The Legacy* (1996–2000) are a few such titles. These popular series again made horror a respectable staple of the prime time boob tube landscape. The revolutionary “initiative” of horror movies to scare and also shatter taboos passed to the new medium ... one that could tell stories in long-form, with complex plot arcs and deep, continuing characterizations.



Horror maestros such as John Carpenter and Wes Craven also continued working in the genre in the 1990s, sometimes even tackling 1950s remakes like John Carpenter's 1995 re-do of *Village of the Damned*.



The 1990s also introduced the world to new horror maestros, including David Fincher, the dark intellect behind *Alien 3* (1992), *Seven* (1995), *The Game* (1997), and *Fight Club* (1999) starring Brad Pitt, pictured above.

At first at least, the 1990s horrors were unable to muster a response beyond endless sequels. This was the age of Recession. *Hellraiser*, *Child's Play*, and the *Alien* saga all saw further editions in the 1990s, but to ever-decreasing effect. Although horror movie maestros like Wes Craven and John Carpenter continued to toil in the genre, their efforts, which included *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995) and *Village of the Damned* (1995) respectively, failed with critics and at the box office.

It was not until 1996 and the advent of *Scream*—a clever, tongue-in-cheek recapitulation of the slasher paradigm written by Kevin Williamson—that horror again returned to the forefront of the American cinema (with films in this cycle including *I Know What You Did Last Summer* [1997], *Halloween H20* [1998], and *Urban Legend* [1998]). These movies succeeded by de-constructing the slasher formula to a degree previously unseen, even in the best of the 1980s examples of the form.

Delightfully, the 1990s would also see the ascent of some new horror auteurs, most notably David Fincher, a former music-video director who took the reins of several genre-oriented films, including the much-maligned *Alien 3* (1992), the nihilistic *Seven* (1995), the Hitchcockian *The Game* (1997), and the ultimate post-modern derivation of *Psycho*, *Fight Club* (1999). Here the schizoid Norman became Durden, an action-hero lunatic. But as Fincher came to the genre and revolutionized it with his brilliant use of CG imagery, others, including Sam Raimi seemed ready to give horror up (for superhero fantasy *Darkman* [1990] and a baseball flick, *For Love of the Game* [1999]). Wes Craven even made an inspiring film about inner city students learning to play the violin, *Music of the Heart* (1999).

The 1980s was also the last decade before CG came to prominence and as such represents something of a golden age. The mechanical effects that made *The Thing* and *An American Werewolf in London* such powerhouses became passé, and to this critic's eyes an element of reality (and thus believability and scariness) passed out of the horror genre for a time.

Remembering the 1980s, it may have been “morning” for that shining city on the hill. But for the American horror movies it was late afternoon, fading quickly to twilight.

Appendix A: 1980s Horror Conventions

The Breast Part of the Movie

Without a doubt, the most common shot from 1980s horror cinema involves a young, nubile female taking her blouse and bra off for the camera. To be included in this category, at least one breast (including nipple) must be revealed on-camera. The undisputed king of this cliché is *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf* (1986), which during its final montage features seventeen views of Sybil Danning ripping off her blouse and revealing her breasts. (Note: this cliché was named by Dr. Frank Leftwich, of Richmond, Virginia.)

Altered States (1980)

The Children (1980)

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Home Sweet Home (1980)

Humanoids from the Deep (1980)

Maniac (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

New Year's Evil (1980)

Night School (1980)

Nightmare City (1980)

The Silent Scream (1980)

Terror Train (1980)

American Werewolf in London (1981)

Blood Tide (1981)

Dead & Buried (1981)

The Dorm that Dripped Blood (1981)

Fear No Evil (1981)

Final Exam (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Galaxy of Terror (1981)

Ghost Story (1981)

Graduation Day (1981)

Halloween II (1981)

The Hand (1981)

The Howling (1981)

Looker (1981)

The Prowler (1981)

Scared to Death (1981)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

Amityville 2: The Possession (1982)

Basket Case (1982)

The Beast Within (1982)

Blood Link (1982)

The Boogens (1982)

The Burning (1982)

Cat People (1982)

Evilspeak (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Horror Planet (1982)

The House on Sorority Row (1982)

Humongous (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

The Killing Hour (1982)

Madman (1982)

Mausoleum (1982)

Parasite (1982)

Q: The Winged Serpent (1982)

Slumber Party Massacre (1982)

The Being (1983)

A Blade in the Dark (1983)

Brainstorm (1983)

Curtains (1983)

The Entity (1983)

The Evil Dead (1983)

The Hunger (1983)

The Keep (1983)

The Lift (1983)

Mortuary (1983)

Night Warning (1983)

Pieces (1983)

Piranha 2: The Spawning (1983)

Sole Survivor (1983)

Spasms (1983)

Ten to Midnight (1983)

X-tro (1983)

The Black Room (1984)

Blind Date (1984)

Blood Kill (1984)

Crimes of Passion (1984)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

Impulse (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Night of the Zombies (1984)

The Prey (1984)

Silent Night, Deadly Night (1984)

The Terminator (1984)

Biohazard (1985)

Creature (1985)

Friday the 13th: A New Beginning (1985)

Fright Night (1985)

The Re-Animator (1985)

Return of the Living Dead (1985)

Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except (1985)

Cassandra (1986)

From Beyond (1986)

Howling II: Your Sister Is A Werewolf (1986)

King Kong Lives (1986)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

Nomads (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Trick or Treat (1986)

Vamp (1986)

Witchboard (1986)

The Wraith (1986)

Angel Heart (1987)

The Believers (1987)

Creepozoids (1987)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

Gothic (1987)

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II (1987)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Opera (1987)

Slumber Party Massacre 2 (1987)

Street Trash (1987)

Unsane (1987)

Brain Damage (1988)

Cellar Dweller (1988)

Critters 2: The Main Course (1988)

Dead Ringers (1988)

Freeway (1988)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Hellbound: Hellraiser 2 (1988)

Hide and Go Shriek (1988)

The Kiss (1988)

Lair of the White Worm (1988)

Monkey Shines (1988)

Moontrap (1988)

Night of the Demons (1988)

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream

Master (1988)

Phantasm 2 (1988)

The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988)

The Seventh Sign (1988)

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988)

Spellbinder (1988)

The Unholy (1988)

The Unnamable (1988)

Vampire at Midnight (1988)

The Church (1989)

Dead Calm (1989)

The Drifter (1989)

Edge of Sanity (1989)

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1989)

A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child (1989)

976-EVIL (1989)

Out of the Dark (1989)

Phantom of the Opera (1989)

Society (1989)

Weed (or Drugs)

Sex and drugs are the two vices of the slasher era. Though the use of marijuana is not as common as a view of breasts, images of teens lighting up probably qualify as the second most-common shot of 1980s horror cinema. Remember, vice must always precede slice-and-dice.

The Children (1980)

Don't Go in the House (1980)

He Knows You're Alone (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

New Year's Evil (1980)

Prom Night (1980)

Terror Train (1980)

Fear No Evil (1981)

Happy Birthday to Me (1981)

The Gates of Hell (1981)

Graduation Day (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Southern Comfort (1981)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

Evilspeak (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Hell Night (1982) (cocaine)

Humongous (1982)

The Killing Hour (1982)

Poltergeist (1982)

Slumber Party Massacre (1982)

The Being (1983)

The Final Terror (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

Pieces (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Ten to Midnight (1983)

The Black Room (1984)

Day of the Dead (1985)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

Friday the 13th A New Beginning (1985) (cocaine)

Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except (1985)

Critters (1986)

House (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

Brain Damage (1988)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988)

Edge of Sanity (1989) (potion)

Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan (1989) (cocaine)

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1989)

Holidays or Special Event–Themed Horror

Always in search of a good organizing principle, and no doubt inspired by the landmark stalk-and-slash epic *Halloween*, horror films in the 1980s had a field day setting their horrific action on holidays or special events (like *Prom Night*).

Friday the 13th (1980) (Friday the 13th)

He Knows You're Alone (1980) (Weddings)

Home Sweet Home (1980) (possibly Thanksgiving)

Mother's Day (1980) (Mother's Day)

New Year's Evil (1980) (New Year's Eve)

Prom Night (1980) (Prom Night)

Final Exam (1981) (Exams Week)

Graduation Day (1981) (Graduation Day)

Happy Birthday to Me (1981) (Birthday)

My Bloody Valentine (1981) (St. Valentine's Day)

The Prowler (1981) (Graduation Dance)

Don't Open Till Christmas (1984) (Christmas)

Silent Night, Deadly Night (1984) (Christmas)

April Fool's Day (1986) (April Fool's Day)

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II (1986) (Prom Night)

Slaughter High (1986) (April Fool's Day)

Bloody New Year (1987) (New Year's Day)

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers (1988)

Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers (1989)

The Stay Awake Shot

This trademark shot of the rubber reality horror film features a close-up of the beleaguered protagonist, all sweaty and bothered, awaking from a terrible dream, usually in bed or on a sofa. Popularized by the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film series, the “Stay Awake” shot is named for the not-very-good 1987 film, *The Stay Awake*, and occurs far more commonly in the latter half of the decade, in the heyday of Freddy and other “rubber reality” horrors.

Don't Go in the House (1980)

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Maniac (1980)

Nightmare City (1980)

Deadly Blessing (1981)

The Hand (1981)

Scared to Death (1981)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

Evilspeak (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Amityville 3-D (1983)

Curtains (1983)

The Keep (1983)

Nightmares (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

Sole Survivor (1983)

Spasms (1983)

Dreamscape (1984)

Firestarter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Night of the Comet (1984)

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

Silent Night, Deadly Night (1984)

The Terminator (1984)

Day of the Dead (1985)

Friday the 13th A New Beginning (1985)

A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge (1985)

Silver Bullet (1985)

Aliens (1986)

Cassandra (1986)

Dream Lover (1986)

Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Angel Heart (1987)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II (1987)

Jaws: The Revenge (1987)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Prison (1987)

Slumber Party Massacre 2 (1987)

Bad Dreams (1988)

Bloodspell (1988)

Cellar Dweller (1988)

Freeway (1988)

Jack's Back (1988)

Lair of the White Worm (1988)

Monkey Shines (1988)

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master (1988)

Phantasm 2 (1988)

The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988)

The Seventh Sign (1988)

The Unholy (1988)

Cameron's Closet (1989)

Communion (1989)

Edge of Sanity (1989)

The Horror Show (1989)

A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child (1989)

Pet Sematary (1989)

The P.O.V. Stalk Shot

See through the eyes of a killer! Many horror films released in the 1980s, particularly those in the early years—the slasher heyday—feature this important, subjective point-of-view shot. It often occurs at night, is sometimes accompanied with breathing or a heartbeat, and the camera actively represents the killer’s “eyes.” Sometimes filmmakers play a joke and the stalk-shot is actually just a prelude to a practical jokester creeping up on a final girl.

The Boogeyman (1980)

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Friday the 13th (1980)

The Hearse (1980)

Home Sweet Home (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

The Watcher in the Woods (1980)

Without Warning (1980)

An American Werewolf in London (1981)

Anthropophagus (1981)

Deadly Blessing (1981)

The Dorm that Dripped Blood (1981)

Halloween II (1981)

My Bloody Valentine (1981)

The Prowler (1981)

Scared to Death (1981)

Strange Behavior (1981)

Wolfen (1981)

Amityville 2: The Possession (1982)

The Beast Within (1982)

The Boogens (1982)

The Burning (1982)

Hell Night (1982)

Humongous (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Venom (1982)

Visiting Hours (1982)

A Blade in the Dark (1983)

Curtains (1983)

The Evil Dead (1983)

Mortuary (1983)

Night Warning (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Spasms (1983)

Blood Kill (1984)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

The Prey (1984)

Biohazard (1985)

Boggy Creek 2: (And the Adventure Continues)

(1985)

Friday the 13th A New Beginning (1985)

The Hills Have Eyes Part II (1985)

Silver Bullet (1985)

Cassandra (1986)

Critters (1986)

Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Blue Monkey (1987)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

It's Alive 3: Island of the Alive (1987)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

The Stay Awake (1987)

Unsane (1987)

Child's Play (1988)

Critters 2: The Main Course (1988)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers (1988)

Monkey Shines (1988)

Night of the Demons (1988)

The Unnamable (1988)

Vampire at Midnight (1988)

Waxwork (1988)

Intruder (1989)

With Apologies to Mr. Hitchcock (a.k.a. the Shower)

An altogether different cliché from the Breast Part of the Movie, though the two shots often arrive in tandem. Here, there is often an intentional reference to *Psycho* and the most famous death in history: Janet Leigh's shower demise. In 1980s horror films, characters step into showers to be slaughtered with alarming regularity, but often the better films (including Tobe Hooper's *The Funhouse*) make ironic or satirical use of the shower as a location for terror. Sometimes no death occurs in the shower, but the nubile teenage girls shower nonetheless.

Dressed to Kill (1980)

He Knows You're Alone (1980)

The Hearse (1980)

Humanoids from the Deep (1980)

Maniac (1980)

New Year's Evil (1980)

Night School (1980)

Fear No Evil (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

The Funhouse (1981)

The Hand (1981)

Happy Birthday to Me (1981)

The Prowler (1981)

The Burning (1982)

Evilspeak (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

The Hunger (1983)

Pieces (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Spasms (1983)

C.H.U.D. (1984)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

The Hitcher (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Trick or Treat (1986)

Witchboard (1986)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

The Stay Awake (1987)

Killer Klowns from Outer Space (1988)

Deep Star Six (1989)

The Horror Show (1989)

Leviathan (1989)

A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child (1989)

Society (1989)

The Campfire

Most good slasher films involve a scene of young, frightened characters huddling closely around a campfire by night. Inevitably, someone tells a ghost story and a practical joke is executed.

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

The Burning (1982)

Just Before Dawn (1982)

Madman (1982)

The Final Terror (1983)

The Prey (1984)

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988)

The Car Won't Start (or Runs Out of Gas)

If nothing else, learn this lesson: Automobiles are utterly unreliable in horror films. If a final girl is in desperate trouble and must escape the scene of a bloody massacre, you would think her car might come in handy. It doesn't. Either the killer has already sabotaged the car, or it's just undependable and won't start—often for no reason at all. Sometimes, in an effort to foster suspense, the car won't start after several tries, but then miraculously does start, even though nothing's changed.

The Hearse (1980)

Home Sweet Home (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

Without Warning (1980)

Dead & Buried (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Halloween II (1981)

The Gates of Hell (1981)

The Howling (1981)

Scared to Death (1981)

Strange Behavior (1981)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Hell Night (1982)

Madman (1982)

Cujo (1983)

Curtains (1983)

The Evil Dead (1983)

Sole Survivor (1983)

The Black Room (1984)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Night of the Zombies (1984)

Silver Bullet (1985)

Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except (1985)

Cassandra (1986)

The Hills Have Eyes Part II (1986)

The Hitcher (1986)

Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

The Slumber Party Massacre 2 (1987)

The Stay Awake (1987)

Bad Taste (1989)

The Cat Jolt/Scare

During the most tense of moments in 1980s slasher films, a false scare will be generated when a cat leaps into frame to scare the protagonist. The cat's jump is invariably accompanied by a feline screeching, quite unlike the soft and kind meows of most real-life kitties. In some cases, it appears the cat has literally been thrown into the frame. The harmless cat scare or jolt is often deployed immediately before the real scare, so that audiences will take a sigh of relief ... and then get

walloped!

Blood Beach (1980)

Humanoids from the Deep (1980)

New Year's Evil (1980)

The Watcher in the Woods (1980)

Without Warning (1980)

Anthropophagus (1981)

Blood Tide (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Halloween II (1981)

The Hand (1981)

Wolfen (1981)

Funeral Home (1982)

Mausoleum (1982)

Slumber Party Massacre (1982)

Still of the Night (1982)

A Stranger is Watching (1982)

The Being (1983)

Night of the Zombies (1984)

The Re-Animator (1985)

Aliens (1986)

April Fool's Day (1986)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

The Kiss (1988)

Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers

(1989)

The Horror Show (1989)

I, Madman (1989)

976-EVIL (1989)

Pet Sematary (1989)

The Practical Joker

There's always some naughty character in 1980s horror films who decides to pull an ill-timed practical joke that will scare the hell out of his already-spooked compatriots. Insensitive boor! That's okay though, the practical joker usually ends up being amongst the first characters killed. Sometimes, as in *Terror Train*, the practical joke also serves as the crime in the past or transgression which sends a formerly healthy person into the depths of psychosis.

Home Sweet Home (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

Terror Train (1980)

the Watcher in the Woods (1980)

The Dorm that Dripped Blood (1981)

My Bloody Valentine (1981)

The Burning (1982)

Evilspeak (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Funeral Home (1982)

Hell Night (1982)

The House Where Evil Dwells (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Just Before Dawn (1982)

The Final Terror (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Friday the 13th A New Beginning (1985)

Fright Night (1985)

April Fool's Day (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Trick or Treat (1986)

The Stay Awake (1987)

Bloodspell (1988)

Hide and Go Shriek (1988)

The Sting in the Tale/Tail

This is the moment in every horror movie when the audience and the hero thinks the killer is dead. He's not. He's just waiting to jump up and kill one more time. Sometimes the sting in the tale/tail is a goof (*Night School*), a harbinger of more horror to come (*Poltergeist III*), or just a surprising twist that casts the film in an entirely new light (*Sleepaway Camp*).

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Humanoids from the Deep (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

Night School (1980)

The Dorm that Dripped Blood (1981)

Final Exam (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Graduation Day (1981)

He Knows You're Alone (1981)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

The House Where Evil Dwells (1982)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Blood Kill (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

The Prey (1984)

Aliens (1986)

Critters (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

Fatal Attraction (1987)

The Hidden (1987)

Terror at Tenkiller (1987)

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers
(1988)

Hellbound: Hellraiser 2 (1988)

Hide and Go Shriek (1988)

Phantasm 2 (1988)

Poltergeist III (1988)

Dead Calm (1989)

Deep Star Six (1989)

Leviathan (1989)

Don't Lose Your Head! The Decapitation

Judging by its frequency in 1980s horror flicks, the decapitation is the ultimate *coup de grâce*, the disgusting death that people fear more than anything else. Sometimes a decapitation occurs off screen (*The Initiation*), sometimes only the results of the decapitation are seen (the head in the fish tank revelation of *He Knows You're Alone*) and, on some grotesque occasions, the event itself is depicted (*Night Warning*).

He Knows You're Alone (1980)

Maniac (1980)

Night School (1980)

Prom Night (1980)

Anthropophagus (1981)

Dead & Buried (1981)

Graduation Day (1981)

Wolfen (1981)

The Burning (1982)

Creepshow (1982)

Evilspeak (1982)

Hell Night (1982)

The House on Sorority Row (1982)

The House Where Evil Dwells (1982)

Humongous (1982)

Madman (1982)

Q: The Winged Serpent (1982)

The Sender (1982)

Slumber Party Massacre (1982)

Curtains (1983)

The Evil Dead (1983)

The Lift (1983)

Night Warning (1983)

Pieces (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

C.H.U.D. (1984)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Silent Night, Deadly Night (1984)

The Company of Wolves (1985)

Friday the 13th A New Beginning (1985)

The Re-Animator (1985)

Silver Bullet (1985)

Cassandra (1986)

Witchboard (1986)

Blue Monkey (1987)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Street Trash (1987)

Hellbound: Hellraiser 2 (1988)

Hide and Go Shriek (1988)

Killer Klowns from Outer Space (1988)

The Serpent and The Rainbow (1988)

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988)

The Unnamable (1988)

Waxwork (1988)

Cameron's Closet (1989)

The Church (1989)

Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhat-tan (1989)

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1989)

The Horror Show (1989)

Phantom of the Opera (1989)

Toilet Terror

It isn't just the shower that can prove scary. The entire bathroom is dangerous, particularly the toilet! It doesn't matter if it's an outhouse (*Boggy Creek 2*, *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning*) or indoors, the toilet proves a popular place to die in 1980s horror cinema. Corpses are arranged on toilets (*The Initiation*), toilets overflow with blood (976-EVIL), and sometimes unlucky people using the facilities get slashed by madmen (*Psycho 3*).

Night School (1980)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Curtains (1983)

The Initiation (1984)

Boggy Creek 2: (And the Adventure Continues)

(1985)

Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning (1985)

Critters (1986)

House (1986)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Street Trash (1987)

Brain Damage (1988)

976-EVIL (1989)

Earth Is a Third-World Country

Was an America with a huge national debt, a glut of foreign investors, in competition with the Japanese (particularly over cars and electronics) simply going to become another third world, debtor nation? That was a fear of many horrors in the 1980s, which posited Earth as a third world country. Alien came to Earth to suck up the natural resources in *They Live*, hunt the populace in *Predator*, use up our bodies in *The Hidden*, dump experimental garbage in *Night of the Creeps*, and so forth.

Critters (1986)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

The Hidden (1987)

Predator (1987)

Killer Klowns from Outer Space (1988)

They Live (1988)

Innocents Abroad

Those silly Americans, heading overseas and buying houses, meddling in matters that aren't their concern. Yes, this is the innocents abroad horror sub-type, wherein unlucky tourists head overseas (usually somewhere in the Far East) and become embroiled in ethnic mythology they don't understand.

Beyond Evil (1980)

An American Werewolf in London (1981)

Blood Tide (1981)

The House Where Evil Dwells (1982)

The Hidden (1987)

Alien/Aliens Rip-Offs

Alien arrived in 1979, and so the 1980s was the time to rip off the popular and commercially successful movie about a diverse crew facing an evil alien terror that would subvert the human reproductive system. One late 1980s twist on the *Alien* rip-off involved moving the location from the final frontier to 20,000 leagues under the sea.

Galaxy of Terror (1981)

Scared to Death (1981)

Horror Planet (1982)

X-tro (1983)

Creature (1985)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

Deep Star Six (1989)

Leviathan (1989)

Lords of the Deep (1989)

The Cassandra Complex (or Just Ignore the Crazy Old Person)

In many horror films of the decade, a potentially demented old man warns interlopers (usually party-minded, irresponsible teens) not to go into the woods, the scene of a previous crime. This character is usually ignored, and terror ensues. Sometimes the Cassandra figure gets killed himself, but sometimes he returns for the sequel.

Blood Beach (1980)

Friday the 13th (1980)

Without Warning (1980)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

The Boogens (1982)

Just Before Dawn (1982)

Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives (1986)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers (1988)

Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan (1989)

Group/Mental Patients

For some reason, the therapy circle or “group” is consistently imperiled in 1980s cinema. The “group” consists of several psychologically disturbed clients and a counselor. Often, the patients are murdered in a fashion somehow related to their particular mental illness. The group may include potential teen suicides (*Dream Warriors*), those suffering from phobias (*Phobia*) or bipolar disorders (*Bad Dreams*), or even just juvenile delinquency (*A New Beginning*, *Bloodspell*). Sometimes, the doctor involved with the group is a hero, sometimes the villain orchestrating the terrible deaths.

Phobia (1980)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

The Sender (1982)

Curtains (1983)

Crimes of Passion (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Friday the 13th: A New Beginning (1985)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Bad Dreams (1988)

Bloodspell (1988)

Communion (1989)

Monster Nostalgia

Ever long for a “kinder and gentler” horror world? Remember the old Universal monsters? The Creature from the Black Lagoon? The Mummy? Bela Lugosi’s Dracula? Boris Karloff as the Frankenstein Monster? The Wolf Man? These movies remember fondly those ghouls from yesteryear, before all audiences wanted was to see some “madman hacking up young virgins,” to quote Peter Vincent. This nostalgia came out in a few movies in the 1980s, with retro-threats.

Fright Night (1985)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

The Monster Squad (1987)

Waxwork (1988)

Body Image/Transformation

The 1980s was a decade of Janus-like contradictions. At the same time that the country endured a fitness craze (accompanied by leg warmers and Olivia Newton John's *Let's Get Physical*), there was also the fear of bodily destruction and disintegration, enhanced by the advent of AIDS. Accordingly, a wide variety of horror films in the 1980s involve the transformation of the human body.

Altered States (1980)

An American Werewolf in London (1981)

The Howling (1981)

The Beast Within (1982)

Cat People (1982)

The Hunger (1983)

X-tro (1983)

The Fly (1986)

The Hidden (1987)

The Fly II (1989)

Leviathan (1989)

Society (1989)

The Homeless

In the 1980s, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer thanks to the "trickle down" theory of Voodoo Economics (or theory of "supply side" economics) put into practice by the Reagan Administration. A side effect or direct result (depending on party affiliation) was increasing numbers of homeless. Importantly, horror films of the 1980s leapt on this facet of modern American life before the decade was out, and the homeless were depicted sometimes heroically (as in *They Live*), sometimes as pawns of evil (as in *Hellraiser* and *Prince of Darkness*), and sometimes as victims of the government (*C.H.U.D.*).

Wolfen (1981)

A Stranger Is Watching (1982)

C.H.U.D. (1984)

Biohazard (1985)

Hellraiser (1986)

Prince of Darkness (1987)

Street Trash (1987)

Child's Play (1988)

Jack's Back (1988)

They Live (1988)

Nuclear Fears (or the Apocalypse Mentality)

It was the end of the world, and *everybody* knew it (even Ronald Reagan). Locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, with ICBMs aimed at one another and ready to destroy the Earth, it's no surprise that horror movies of the 1980s evidenced a deep-seated fear about the future and the prospects of a nuclear war. Nuclear power itself was seen as a danger. There was a nuclear disaster in *The Children*, anti-nuke protesters in *Alone in the Dark*, and futuristic post-nuclear dystopias in efforts such as *Parasite*. *Dreamscape* concerned a president obsessed with nuclear war. In one notable case—*Night of the Comet*—the fear was not nuclear, but apocalypse was still the result.

The Children (1980)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

Parasite (1982)

The Being (1983)

The Dead Zone (1983)

Blood Kill (1984)

Dreamscape (1984)

Night of the Comet (1984)

The Terminator (1984)

Future Kill (1985)

Aliens (1986)

Miracle Mile (1988)

Burndown (1989)

Attack of the Yuppies

Because Nazis were getting old as Hollywood's favorite villains. Seriously, the sixties gave the world hippies; the eighties responded with—yuppies! These young, upwardly mobile Americans had a surprisingly active life in horror films of the 1980s, sometimes as heroes (*Blind Date*, *Fatal Attraction*), sometimes as victims (*The Housekeeper*), sometimes as villains (*The Believers*) and even serial killers (*Ten to Midnight*). Yuppies traveled to the bottom of the sea (*Lords of the Deep*) and in one notable case (*Aliens*), yuppies even made it into outer space.

Ten to Midnight (1983)

Blind Date (1984)

Creature (1985)

The Housekeeper (1985)

Aliens (1986)

April Fool's Day (1986)

The Believers (1987)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

Fatal Attraction (1987)

Spellbinder (1988)

Leviathan (1989)

Lisa (1989)

Lords of the Deep (1989)

Society (1989)

We Are the World

In a number of the decade's horror films, a threat from outside (either outer space or deep beneath the sea) is met by an ethnically and sexually diverse crew, sometimes even international in makeup. You can see this crew (whites, blacks, Latinos, males, females, Americans, Russians) as a microcosm for the endangered Earth. When they work together to defeat a bad guy, they are defending the planet and proving that we can all get along. Vaguely related to the *Alien* rip-off convention.

Aliens (1986)

Predator (1987)

Deep Star Six (1989)

Leviathan (1989)

The Vietnam Vet

The 1980s was the decade for the Vietnam veteran on the ascent. With the advent of films like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), the war vet was back at the forefront of the American imagination. In horror movies, sometimes the veteran was the hero. Reb Brown played one in *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf* (1986) and uttered dialogue like "I haven't felt like this since I was in the Mekong Delta!" Other times, however, the Vietnam veteran was depicted as a madman and lunatic, as was the case with Martin Landau in *Without Warning* (1980) or Chop-Top in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* sequel.

Without Warning (1980)

Southern Comfort (1981)

The Sender (1982)

Biohazard (1985)

Thou Shalt Not Kill ... Except (1985)

House (1986)

Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf (1986)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part II (1986)

Street Trash (1987)

TV Is Evil (or Tabloid TV Culture)

An actor by profession, President Ronald Reagan knew how to stage patriotic TV events to perfection. No president before or since has better understood how to use TV as a bully pulpit, and that may be why so many cinematic horrors of the 1980s worried about the boob tube. It was derided as a hypnotic medium for consumption (*Looker*, *Halloween III*), depicted as the gateway to evil (*Poltergeist*), satirized for its celebrity obsession (*It's Alive III*, *Nightmare on Elm Street III*) and even considered a tool to keep Americans occupied and asleep while politicians destroyed the American dream (*They Live*). In *The Seventh Sign*, television news offered Exhibit A that mankind had squandered its resources and Judgment Day was nigh.

The Howling (1981)

Looker (1981)

Halloween III: Season of the Witch (1982)

Poltergeist (1982)

Videodrome (1983)

The Stuff (1985)

Demons 2 (1986)

It's Alive III: Island of the Alive (1987)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Child's Play (1988)

The Seventh Sign (1988)

They Live (1988)

Shocker (1989)

Don't Feed Them After Midnight (or Gremlins)

Joe Dante's 1984 film about cute little Mogwai set off a fad of horror movies concerning diminutive monsters wreaking havoc. Very few of these movies were actually any good, or carried *Gremlins'* unique environmental message.

Gremlins (1984)

Critters (1985)

Ghoulies (1985)

Troll (1986)

Child's Play (1988)

Critters 2: The Main Course (1988)

Comin' at Ya!

The early 1980s saw a renaissance in movies produced in 3-D. To get the full effect of the film, the viewers had to don cardboard glasses (ones that were notorious for giving the percipient a headache!). The 3-D trend in horror mysteriously involved a lot of "third" parts in franchise films, including *Friday the 13th*, *Amityville* and *Jaws*. Outside horror, the 3-D trend included films like *Treasure of the Four Crowns* (1981) and *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone* (1983).

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Parasite (1982)

Amityville 3-D (1983)

Jaws 3-D (1983)

Monsters in the Sewer

Above? Don't worry, be happy. Everything's cool. Below? Giant alligators, genetically engineered monsters, and toxic waste-born creeps! Terror is just beneath the surface in films with monstrous under dwellers.

Alligator (1980)

Scared to Death (1982)

C.H.U.D. (1984)

Future Kill (1985)

The Carnival/Amusement Park

The carnival is a society all its own (down to its own population: carnie). There are rules there and interlopers don't always understand them. A number of 1980s horror films are set (or feature scenes set at) carnivals and circuses.

Fade to Black (1980)

Humanoids from the Deep (1980)

The Watcher in the Woods (1980)

The Funhouse (1981)

He Knows You're Alone (1981)

Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983)

Bloody New Year (1987)

It's Alive III: Island of the Alive (1987)

Fatal Attraction (1987)

Hellbound: Hellraiser 2 (1988)

Killer Klowns from Outer Space (1988)

Ghoulies 2 (1989)

It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

Thunder and lightning are scary. So is pitch black nighttime. That's why so many horror movies have scenes in which someone attacks on a "dark and stormy night." This may be a way of coupling evil with nature (that certainly seems to be the case in many slasher films), or it may simply be a way to amp up the terror.

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Anthropophagus (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Southern Comfort (1981)

Amityville 2: The Possession (1982)

The Beyond (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Funeral Home (1982)

Mausoleum (1982)

Slumber Party Massacre (1982)

Curtains (1983)

The Lift (1983)

Night Warning (1983)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

Boggy Creek 2: (And the Adventure Continues)

(1985)

Friday the 13th A New Beginning (1985)

Slaughter High (1986)

It's Alive III: Island of the Alive (1987)

The Monster Squad (1987)

Unsane (1987)

Bloodspell (1988)

Cellar Dweller (1988)

Child's Play (1988)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Monkey Shines (1988)

Pumpkinhead (1988)

The Unnamable (1988)

Blind Fear (1989)

Edge of Sanity (1989)

I, Madman (1989)

Are You Ready for Your Close-up? (the Video Auteur)

Thanks to incredible advances in miniaturization, portable home video cameras became affordable and lightweight in the mid-to-late 1980s. A revolution in home movies began. Very shortly, this trend trickled down into horror movies. A videographer or amateur movie maker is featured in several films. Sometimes he's a victim (*April Fool's Day*), sometimes he's an "artist" (*Cellar Dweller*), and sometimes he's a serial killer reviewing a day on the job (*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*).

Dead of Winter (1985)

April Fool's Day (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Cellar Dweller (1988)

Friday the 13th VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan (1989)

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master (1989)

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1989)

Check the Rearview! (the Killer in the Back Seat)

Those pesky slashers and monsters, always turning up where you least expect it. Even though it strains believability at times (especially considering that remarkable gift called peripheral vision), killers in 1980s movies repeatedly surprise heroes by turning up in the back seat. All the better to kill you.

Still of the Night (1982)

Curtains (1983)

The Initiation (1984)

Dead of Winter (1985)

Ghoulies (1985)

Slaughter High (1986)

Child's Play (1988)

Ghosts

Horror filmmakers in the 1980s made a concerted attempt to revive the Hollywood supernatural film of previous eras, with mixed success. Slasher was clearly the flavor of the day, but the decade also saw a number of haunted house and ghost films, some of which are today considered classics.

The Changeling (1980)

The Hearse (1980)

The Shining (1980)

Ghost Story (1981)

The House Where Evil Dwells (1982)

Poltergeist (1982)

The Sender (1982)

Amityville 3-D (1983)

The Entity (1983)

House (1986)

Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986)

Poltergeist III (1988)

The Automobile Junkyard

Perhaps a symbol of America's wealth, perhaps a representation of its disposable culture, the automobile junkyard features prominently in several 1980s horror films. Freddy's bones were buried there, in one instance.

Halloween III: Season of the Witch (1982)

The Being (1983)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Street Trash (1987)

Brain Damage (1988)

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master (1988)

Unwashed Mountain People or Locals

A holdover, perhaps, from such 1970s savage cinema masterpieces as *Deliverance* and *The Hills Have Eyes*. A number of 1980s horrors feature terrifying mountain men who attack unwitting teens stupid enough to wander into the wilderness. These films tend to be harrowing, which is good, but also formulaic, which isn't.

Mother's Day (1980)

Humongous (1982)

Just Before Dawn (1982)

Madman (1982)

The Final Terror (1983)

The Prey (1984)

The Hills Have Eyes Part II (1985)

Pumpkinhead (1988)

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

Considering the two faces of the 1980s, the “don’t worry/be happy” surface and the “be afraid, be very afraid” underbelly, perhaps it isn’t surprising that mirrors appear frequently in horror films of the decade. The mirror might be a gateway to the anti-matter world (*Prince of Darkness*), a repository for an evil memory (*Boogeyman*), a clue as to the identity of a killer (*Dressed to Kill*), or the very thing which defeats evil (*A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master*). One rubber-reality movie of the 1980s, *Poltergeist III* features a leitmotif devoted to mirrors.

The Boogeyman (1980)

Dressed to Kill (1980)

The Sender (1982)

The Entity (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

The Initiation (1984)

Cassandra (1986)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II (1987)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Prince of Darkness (1987)

Night of the Demons (1988)

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master (1988)

Poltergeist III (1988)

The Church (1989)

Phantom of the Opera (1989)

Gang Movies

Forget the Crips and the Bloods, gang members had a healthy life in the genre cinema of the eighties. They were Jason's victims (*Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D*), the hope for the future (*Blood Kill*), and even vampires (*The Lost Boys*).

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Parasite (1982)

Blood Kill (1984)

Future Kill (1985)

Nomads (1986)

The Wraith (1986)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

The Lost Boys (1987)

The Sins of the Father

Here, the legacy of the parents is passed on to the children. A particularly timely horror because in the 1980s, America was mortgaging its future, accumulating a huge debt that future

generations will be forced to contend with.

Scanners (1981)

The Beast Within (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

Cassandra (1986)

Bloodspell (1989)

The Fly II (1989)

Pet Sematary (1989)

As the Worm Turns

A conceit named by John Stanley, author of the *Creature Features Movie Guide*. In films of this type, a picked-on dork, usually scrawny, finds some way to strike back at the bullies who have made his life living hell. Sometimes, he does so with technology (*Evilspeak*), sometimes by Satanic rock music (*Trick or Treat*), and sometimes at the encouragement of an evil telephone line (*976-EVIL*). *Carrie* (1976) may have been the progenitor of this particular trend.

Fade to Black (1980)

Evilspeak (1982)

A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge (1985)

Trick or Treat (1986)

976-EVIL (1989)

The Library of Doom!

Many 1980s films feature scenes set at libraries. It makes sense: Often characters are faced with the necessity of research (*The Changeling*, *Of Unknown Origin*) and the library is simply the best place for that (at

least pre-Internet). Some library scenes even involve rapes and murders (*The Incubus*), and frightening confrontations with the likes of Mr. Dark (*Something Wicked This Way Comes*).

The Changeling (1980)

The Beyond (1981)

Evilspeak (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Of Unknown Origin (1983)

Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983)

Witchboard (1986)

The Unnamable (1988)

I, Madman (1989)

The Book Store of Death

Perhaps a corollary to the Library of Doom. Many 1980s horror films also feature scenes set at used bookstores. Who says horror movies aren't literary?

The Howling (1981)

I, Madman (1988)

Vampire at Midnight (1988)

I, Madman (1989)

Rats

Though the “when animal attacks” revenge-of-nature movies were far more popular in the 1970s than in the 1980s, several movies about vermin—rats—were made during the decade. Sometimes the mean rats are just protecting their young (*Nightmares*), sometimes they’re unusually large (*Of Unknown Origin*) and on one occasion, they prove

smarter than man (*Blood Kill*).

The Sender (1982)

Nightmares (1983)

Of Unknown Origin (1983)

Blood Kill (1984)

Crawlspace (1986)

Creepozoids (1987)

Slashers

Who are these guys? A raft of homicidal maniacs with their very own movie paradigm, that's who. In the 1980s, slashers were the monster *du jour*.

Dressed to Kill (1980)

Friday the 13th (1980)

He Knows You're Alone (1980)

Home Sweet Home (1980)

Maniac (1980)

New Year's Evil (1980)

Night School (1980)

Prom Night (1980)

The Silent Scream (1980)

Terror Train (1980)

Anthropophagus (1981)

Deadly Blessing (1981)

The Dorm that Dripped Blood (1981)

The Fan (1981)

Final Exam (1981)

Friday the 13th Part II (1981)

Graduation Day (1981)

Halloween II (1981)

Happy Birthday to Me (1981)

My Bloody Valentine (1981)

The Prowler (1981)

Alone in the Dark (1982)

The Burning (1982)

Friday the 13th Part 3 in 3-D (1982)

Hell Night (1982)

The House on Sorority Row (1982)

Humongous (1982)

Just Before Dawn (1982)

Madman (1982)

Night Warning (1982)

Slumber Party Massacre (1982)

Visiting Hours (1982)

A Blade in the Dark (1983)

Curtains (1983)

The Final Terror (1983)

Mortuary (1983)

Nightmares (1983)

Pieces (1983)

Psycho II (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Ten to Midnight (1983)

Blind Date (1984)

Don't Open Till Christmas (1984)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

The Initiation (1984)

The Prey (1984)

Silent Night, Deadly Night (1984)

Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning (1985)

The Hills Have Eyes Part 2 (1985)

April Fool's Day (1986)

Cassandra (1986)

The Fantasist (1986)

Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives! (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Silent Night, Deadly Night 2 (1986)

Slaughter High (1986)

Terror at Tenkiller (1986)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2 (1986)

Blood Hook (1987)

New York Ripper (1987)

Slumber Party Massacre 2 (1987)

Anguish (1988)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers

(1988)

Hide and Go Shriek (1988)

Jack's Back (1988)

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988)

Cutting Class (1989)

Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan (1989)

Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers (1989)

Lisa (1989)

Out of the Dark (1989)

Silent Night, Deadly Night 3: Better Watch Out! (1989)

Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland (1989)

Rubber Realities

In the rubber reality horrors of the 1980s, terrible (and usually physically distinctive) villains have the capacity to alter reality itself, or draw in unsuspecting victims to their own personal domains. Freddy controls dreams, Pinhead dominates Hell, Lamberto Bava's *Demons* come from a movie (or TV screen), Kane in *Poltergeist III* controls mirrors, and so forth. Notice that these rubber reality horrors dominate the last part of the decade, following *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

Demons (1985)

A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge (1985)

From Beyond (1986)

House (1986)

Trick or Treat (1986)

Troll (1986)

Chinese Ghost Story (1987)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night 2 (1987)

Hellraiser (1987)

A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors (1987)

Prince of Darkness (1987)

Slumber Party Massacre 2 (1987)

Bad Dreams (1988)

Blood Spell (1988)

Cellar Dweller (1988)

Hellbound, Hellraiser 2 (1988)

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master (1988)

Phantasm 2 (1988)

Poltergeist 3 (1988)

The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988)

Waxwork (1988)

Cameron's Closet (1989)

The Horror Show (1989)

I, Madman (1989)

A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child (1989)

976-EVIL (1989)

Phantom of the Opera (1989)

Shocker (1989)

Silent Night, Deadly Night III: Better Watch Out! (1989)

Vampires

The number one boogeyman of the 1970s tried in vain for a resurrection in the 1980s. Vampires were re-imagined through the auspices of the punk rock culture (*The Hunger*), nostalgia (*Fright Night*), youth gangs (*The Lost Boys*), and the Western paradigm (*Near Dark*). Notice that although vampire films are fewer in the Reagan Decade, they're also (mostly) of high quality.

The Hunger (1983)

Fright Night (1985)

Lost Boys (1987)

The Monster Squad (1987)

Near Dark (1987)

Vampire at Midnight (1988)

Waxwork (1988)

Werewolves

Werewolf movies saw tremendous popularity in the 1980s, in part because new prosthetic special effects from the likes of Rob Bottin and Rick Baker could now be used to dramatize their full-moon transformations. The decade started off strong, but ended with three Howling sequels, which may make want to eat a silver bullet.

An American Werewolf in London (1981)

The Howling (1981)

Silver Bullet (1985)

Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf (1986)

Howling III: The Marsupials (1987)

Howling IV: The Original Nightmare (1988)

Waxwork (1988)

Flashbacks? The Clips Movie

Some Satanic movie producer realized in the 1980s that it would be cheaper to produce sequels girded with clips from the original, more popular film, rather than spend money on creating a totally new follow-up. This is the most evil convention of 1980s cinema: the clips movie.

Boogeyman II (1983)

The Hills Have Eyes Part II (1984)

Slumber Party Massacre 2 (1987)

Silent Night, Deadly Night II (1988)

Silent Night, Deadly Night III: Better Watch Out (1989)

Educational Screams

Horror films in the 1980s were often set at some venue of higher learning, whether high school (*Prom Night*), college (*Graduation Day*), or a military academy (*Evilspeak*). This happened not because horror movies have a fidelity to higher learning, but rather because those who attend these institutions are young and well-proportioned.

Night School (1980)

Prom Night (1980)

The Dorm that Dripped Blood (1981)

Final Exam (1981)

Graduation Day (1981)

Happy Birthday to Me (1981)

Strange Behavior (1981)

Evilspeak (1982)

Pieces (1983)

The Initiation (1984)

The Re-Animator (1985)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

Trick or Treat (1986)

The Stay Awake (1987)

The Unnamable (1988)

The Feisty Reporter

Lois Lane would be proud. A commonly seen character in many 1980s horrors is the journalist who—like a dog with a bone—just can't let go of a good story. Sometimes the journalists are heroes (*The Boogens*), sometimes they hide dark secrets of their own (*The Incubus*), and on at least one occasion, they're scum (*Manhunter*).

The Howling (1981)

The Boogens (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Visiting Hours (1982)

The Lift (1983)

Pieces (1983)

C.H.U.D. (1984)

Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf (1986)

Manhunter (1986)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

Critters 2: The Main Course (1988)

Burndown (1989)

The Anthology

Horror movies in the decade of *Miami Vice* Blazers, Tab Soda and acid-washed jeans, also flirted with the format of the anthology. Why not? It's a good deal: several stories per each movie. George Romero took a shot at one (*Creepshow*) as did Lewis Teague (*Cat's Eye*). *Twilight Zone: The Movie* had four notable directors on board: John Landis, Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante and George Miller. For the record, Stephen King stories were the source material for three of the six anthologies in the 1980s.

The Monster Club (1981)

Creepshow (1982)

Nightmares (1983)

Twilight Zone: The Movie (1983)

Cat's Eye (1985)

Creepshow 2 (1987)

That Old Voodoo

Vodoun-related horror movies had a mini-boom in 1987 and 1988.

Angel Heart (1987)

The Believers (1987)

Child's Play (1988)

The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988)

The Dead Walk

Thanks to successful seventies efforts such as *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) and Lucio Fulci's *Zombie* (1979), the zombie film made a huge comeback in the 1980s. George Romero contributed the third installment of his "Dead" trilogy, 1985's *Day of the Dead*, while Dan O'Bannon sent up the whole premise with the landmark "punk" film *Return of the Living Dead* (1985). Zombies got smart in the 1980s (*Day of the Dead*), ate brains (*Return of the Living Dead*), and even learned to walk fast and use tools (*Nightmare City*).

Nightmare City (1980)

The Beyond (1981)

The Gates of Hell (1981)

The Evil Dead (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

Night of the Zombies (1984)

Day of the Dead (1985)

The Re-Animator (1985)

Return of the Living Dead (1985)

Creepozoids (1986)

Night of the Creeps (1986)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

Serpent and the Rainbow (1988)

Waxwork (1988)

The Dead Don't Die

The victims return from the grave to get their killer! Revenge from beyond the grave took all forms in the 1980s, from genuine zombies

(*Creepshow*) to hallucinations (*Maniac*, *Don't Go in the House*) to one bizarre incident in which a man with cicada DNA births a son—who, 17 years later, in time with the cycle of the cicada—will become a monster too and continue the dead man's vendetta against a Southern family (*The Beast Within*). Got that?

Don't Go in the House (1980)

Maniac (1980)

The Beast Within (1982)

Creepshow (1982)

The Hunger (1983)

Slaughter High (1986)

Psychic Powers

Automatic writing (*The Changeling*), clairvoyance (*The Killing Hour*), cross-species mental telepathy (*Spasms*), and telekinesis (*Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood*) all had their day in 1980s horror films.

The Changeling (1980)

Scanners (1981)

The Killing Hour (1982)

The Sender (1982)

A Blade in the Dark (1983)

The Dead Zone (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

Spasms (1983)

Firestarter (1984)

Biohazard (1985)

Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986)

Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Mad Scientists

Dr. Frankenstein, the scientist who reached for the sun but got burned, is an archetype in horror movies. That character template was revived successfully in the 1980s. Mad doctors abnormally prolonged life in *Strange Behavior*, built killer robots in *Deadly Friend*, and mated humans with fish in *The Kindred*. Dr. Frankenstein himself reappeared (more lustful, perhaps, than before) in *The Bride*, and the decade ended with the return of another famous mad scientist, Dr. Jekyll (in *Edge of Sanity*).

Dead and Buried (1981)

Scanners (1981)

Strange Behavior (1981)

The Bride (1985)

Day of the Dead (1985)

The Re-Animator (1985)

Deadly Friend (1986)

The Kindred (1986)

Monster in the Closet (1987)

Edge of Sanity (1989)

Bad Fathers

In the 1980s, father didn't know best. Father was a liar and murderer (*The Attic*), a cannibal (*Anthropophagus*, *Parents*), a corrupt religious zealot (*Deadly Blessing*), unfaithful (*The Initiation*), a vigilante (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*), a disengaged, self-obsessed yuppie (*The Housekeeper*), incestuous (*Cassandra*), alcoholic (*Poltergeist II: The Other Side*), a serial killer (*The Stepfather*), and finally, insane (*Pet Sematary*). Whew! The family unit will never be the same.

The Attic (1980)

Anthropophagus (1981)

Deadly Blessing (1981)

Amityville 2: The Possession (1982)

Creepshow (1982)

Visiting Hours (1982)

The Entity (1983)

One Dark Night (1983)

The Initiation (1984)

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

The Housekeeper (1985)

Cassandra (1986)

Deadly Friend (1986)

Dream Lover (1986)

Poltergeist II: The Other Side (1986)

Hellraiser (1987)

Bloodspell (1988)

Pumpkinhead (1988)

The Stepfather (1988)

Parents (1989)

Pet Sematary (1989)

The Stepfather 2 (1989)

Mother's Day

Mom took her share of guff in the 1980s horror cinema. The decade of aerobics, electronic handheld games like Simon and Merlin, and velcro wallets also brought a few evil moms. Some mothers were enablers (*Mother's Day*), some were sexually twisted (*Night Warning*), some were wild maniacs (*The Final Terror*) and some even poisoned their children (*Flowers in the Attic*).

Fade to Black (1980)

Mother's Day (1980)

The Final Terror (1983)

Night Warning (1983)

Psycho II (1983)

Sleepaway Camp (1983)

The Initiation (1984)

Psycho 3 (1986)

Flowers in the Attic (1987)

Hellraiser (1987)

Parents (1989)

Fish Stories

It took a long, long time to get that rotten fish smell out of Hollywood. No, not that one. The stink that emerged when every studio sought to repeat the success of *Jaws* (1975). Accordingly, the 1980s featured a number of horror movies based around sea critters.

Humanoids from the Deep (1980)

Blood Tide (1981)

Jaws 3-D (1983)

Piranha 2: the Spawning (1983)

Jaws: the Revenge (1987)

Deep Star Six (1989)

Leviathan (1989)

This Boy's Bedroom

Star Wars (1977) was so popular and its merchandise so ubiquitous, that toys from the film, its sequel, and other popular icons of pop culture began appearing in horror movies of the 1980s. This Boy's Bedroom became a place of safety and horror simultaneously. Frankenstein merchandise dominates a boy's room in *The Funhouse*, *Return of the Jedi* bedcovers appear in *The Stuff*, and so forth.

The Funhouse (1981)

Poltergeist (1982)

The Stuff (1985)

Invaders from Mars (1986)

Neon Maniacs (1986)

The Gate (1987)

The Monster Squad (1987)

Lady in White (1988)

Join Us: The Re-Possessed

Although *The Exorcist* did not return in the 1980s, a number of other films picked up the gauntlet with "possession" movies in which characters were overcome by demons, devils and ghosts.

Beyond Evil (1980)

Amityville 2: The Possession (1982)

The House Where Evil Dwells (1982)

Mausoleum (1982)

The Evil Dead (1983)

Witchboard (1986)

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn (1987)

Night of the Demons (1988)

The Church (1989)

The Music Box

Music boxes with haunting melodies played important roles in a few 1980s horror films including:

The Changeling (1980)

The Watcher in the Woods (1980)

Flowers in the Attic (1987)

Single Woman in Jeopardy

Call it the Anti–Mary Tyler Moore Syndrome. These women might not make it, after all. They’re divorced or single, on their own, and they’re being stalked ... by evil.

The Hearse (1980)

The Beyond (1981)

The Entity (1983)

Dream Lover (1986)

Lisa (1989)

The Blind Leading the Blind

Several horror movies from the 1980s feature characters who are

blind. Inevitably (perhaps because they don't possess the sense of sight), they have some other deep knowledge that comes in handy. A blind girl can smell evil in *Anthropophagus*, and a blind man tracks down a serial killer in *Blind Date*, etc. In *Blind Fear*, a sightless *femme fatale* takes out a group of terrorists. Sometimes in horror, blindness is also a condition that's a punishment for seeing something behind comprehension, as in *The Beyond* and *The Unholy*.

Anthropophagus (1981)

The Beyond (1981)

Blind Date (1984)

Demons (1985)

The Hills Have Eyes Part II (1985)

Manhunter (1986)

The Unholy (1988)

Blind Fear (1989)

Twins

Doubles, doppelgangers and evil duplicates, oh my! Twins show up in a number of 1980s horror films. Sometimes they're Siamese twins (*Basket Case*), sometimes one twin is supernatural (*The Incubus*) and sometimes the twins are twisted gynecologists (*Dead Ringers*).

Basket Case (1982)

Blood Link (1982)

The Incubus (1982)

Just Before Dawn (1982)

The Initiation (1984)

Dead of Winter (1985)

Dead Ringers (1988)

Hospital Horror

Hospitals are scary places, and that's doubly true in horror films. Mad slashers attack there frequently in the 1980s. So make sure you bring your insurance card with you next time you visit.

Halloween II (1981)

Visiting Hours (1982)

Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

Blue Monkey (1987)

As in any decade, many popular notions and themes were repeated frequently in Reagan's decade of hair bands, Freezie Freakies, Pac-Man and the Izod Alligator. The glut of slasher films adopting a common paradigm made it even more likely that certain clichés and tropes would be rehashed mercilessly. That's why in the 1980s horror cinema, there are seemingly infinite shots of a female character taking off a bra, endless cars that won't start at inopportune times, and the ever-popular diversionary scare, "the cat jump."

Below, all your old favorites from the dawn of the MTV Age are remembered. They're featured in no particular order, and each convention or cliché must have recurred at least three times in the 1980s to be included on the list.

Appendix B: The 1980s Horror Hall of Fame

In the 1980s, horror movie enthusiasts got a new set of fearsome “boogeymen,” including the most popular horror star of the decade, dream demon Freddy Krueger, played by Robert Englund.

Another popular star “type” of the 1980s was the scream queen ... the slasher paradigm’s so-called final girl. Of these, Jamie Lee Curtis is the best known, though there were others of note, including Linnea Quigley.

To be registered here in the 1980s Horror Hall of fame, a performer had to appear in at least three films during the years 1980–89.

R.G. Armstrong *The Beast Within* (1982), *Evilspeak* (1982), *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Predator* (1987).

Tom Atkins *The Fog* (1980), *Creepshow* (1982), *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982), *Night of the Creeps* (1986).

Drew Barrymore *Altered States* (1980); *Firestarter* (1984); *Cat's Eye* (1985).

Eddie Benton *Prom Night* (1980), *Halloween II* (1981), *The Boogens* (1982).

Michael Biehn *The Fan* (1981); *The Terminator* (1984); *Aliens* (1986); *The Seventh Sign* (1987); *The Abyss* (1989).

Lisa Blount *Dead and Buried* (1981), *Nightflyers* (1987), *Prince of Darkness* (1987).

Thom Bray *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *The Horror Show* (1989).

Bruce Campbell *The Evil Dead* (1983), *Evil Dead 2* (1987), *Maniac Cop* (1988), *Moontrap* (1988), *Intruder* (1989).

John Carradine *Boogeyman* (1980), *The Howling* (1981), *The Monster Club* (1981), *Boogeyman II* (1983); *Monster in the Closet* (1987)

Jamie Lee Curtis *The Fog* (1980); *Prom Night* (1980); *Terror Train* (1980); *Halloween II* (1981); *Road Games* (1982).

Robert Englund *Dead and Buried* (1981), *Galaxy of Terror* (1981), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985), *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987); *A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* (1988); *A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child* (1989), *Phantom of the Opera* (1989).



Robert Englund, seen in a publicity still from the Wes Craven TV series, *Nightmare Café* (1992), appeared in several horror films during the 1980s, outside of his appearances as Freddy Krueger.

Corey Feldman *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (1984), *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* (1985), *The Lost Boys* (1987).

Richard Fleischer *The Hand* (1981), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Bad Dreams* (1988).

Louise Fletcher *Brainstorm* (1980), *Strange Behavior* (1981), *Firestarter* (1984), *Flowers in the Attic* (1987), *Invaders from Mars* (1987).

George Buck Flower *The Fog* (1980), *Pumpkinhead* (1988), *They Live* (1988).

Dennis Franz *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Psycho II* (1983), *Body Double* (1984).

Christopher George *Graduation Day* (1981), *Mortuary* (1983), *Pieces* (1983).

Lynda Day George *Beyond Evil* (1980), *Mortuary* (1983), *Pieces* (1983).

John Getz *Blood Simple* (1984), *The Fly* (1986), *The Fly II* (1989).

Jenette Goldstein *Aliens* (1986), *Near Dark* (1987), *Miracle Mile* (1988).

Clu Gulager *The Initiation* (1984), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985), *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *The Hidden* (1987).

Kevin Peter Hall *Without Warning* (1980); *Monster in the Closet* (1987); *Predator* (1987).

Linda Hamilton *Children of the Corn* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984), *King Kong Lives* (1986).



Between *Children of the Corn* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984) and *King Kong Lives* (1986), Linda Hamilton was a frequent face in 1980s horror flicks.



Lance Henriksen gave several great—and diverse—performances in horror films throughout the “greed is good” decade, from his turn in the anthology *Nightmares* (1983) and his comedic role in *The Terminator* (1984) to his villainous portrayal of a vampire in *Near Dark* (1987).

Lance Henriksen *Nightmares* (1983), *The Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), *Near Dark* (1987), *The Horror Show* (1989), *Pumpkinhead* (1989).

Hal Holbrook *The Fog* (1980), *Creepshow* (1982), *The Unholy* (1988).

John Houseman *The Fog* (1980), *Murder by Phone* (1980), *Ghost Story* (1981).

Clint Howard *Evilspeak* (1982), *The Wraith* (1986), *Freeway* (1988).

Michael Ironside *Scanners* (1981), *Visiting Hours* (1982), *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night 2* (1987).

Peter Jason *Dreamscape* (1984), *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *They Live* (1988).

James Karen *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *Invaders from Mars* (1987) *The Return of the Living Dead Part 2* (198?).

George Kennedy *Death Ship* (1980), *Just Before Dawn* (1982); *Creepshow 2* (1987).

Martin Landau *Without Warning* (1980), *Alone in the Dark* (1982), *The Being* (1983).

Heather Langenkamp *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1985), *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987), *Shocker* (1989).

Geoffrey Lewis *Ten to Midnight* (1983), *Night of the Comet* (1984), *Out of the Dark* (1989).

Roddy McDowall *Dead of Winter* (1985), *Fright Night* (1985), *Fright Night 2* (1988); *Cutting Class* (1989).

Richard Masur *The Thing* (1982), *Nightmares* (1983), *The Believers* (1987).

Dick Miller *The Howling* (1981), *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), *Gremlins* (1984), *Night of the Creeps* (1986).

Cameron Mitchell *The Silent Scream* (1980), *Without Warning* (1980), *Blood Link* (1982).

Michael Moriarity *Blood Link* (1982), *Q: The Winged Serpent* (1982), *The Stuff* (1984), *Troll* (1986), *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive* (1987).

Tom Noonan *Wolfen* (1981), *Manhunter* (1986), *The Monster Squad* (1987).

Miguel Nunez *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* (1985), *Return*

of the Living Dead (1985), *Deep Star Six* (1989).

Heather O'Rourke *Poltergeist* (1982), *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986), *Poltergeist III* (1988).

Michael Pataki *Dead and Buried* (1981), *Graduation Day* (1981), *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers* (1988).

Bill Paxton *Mortuary* (1983), *Impulse* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), *Near Dark* (1987).

Anthony Perkins *Psycho II* (1983), *Crimes of Passion* (1984), *Psycho III* (1986), *Edge of Sanity* (1989).

Robert Picardo *The Howling* (1981), *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), *Jack's Back* (1988), *976-EVIL* (1989).

Donald Pleasence *Alone in the Dark* (1980), *Halloween II* (1981); *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers* (1988); *Halloween V: The Revenge of Michael Myers* (1989).

Linnea Quigley *Graduation Day* (1981), *The Black Room* (1984), *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984), *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *Creepozoids* (1986), *Night of the Demons* (1988).

Kathleen Quinlan *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), *Black Out* (1985), *Warning Sign* (1985).

Rick Rossovich *Looker* (1981), *The Terminator* (1984), *Warning Sign* (1985), *Spellbinder* (1988).

Zelda Rubinstein *Poltergeist* (1982), *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986), *Anguish* (1987), *Poltergeist III* (1988).

John Saxon *Beyond Evil* (1980), *Blood Beach* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987), *Unsane* (1987).

Jill Schoelen *The Stepfather* (1987); *Cutting Class* (1989), *Phantom of the Opera* (1989).

Martin Sheen *The Dead Zone* (1983), *Firestarter* (1984), *The Believers* (1987).

Craig Wasson *Ghost Story* (1981), *Body Double* (1984), *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987).

Daphne Zuniga *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* (1981), *The Initiation* (1984), *The Fly II* (1989).

Appendix C: Memorable Ad Lines

The selling and promotion of horror movies could be the subject of a pretty good book all on its own, and the ad or “tag” lines for 1980s horror films have, on some occasions, become the stuff of legend. “Be afraid, be very afraid” (*The Fly*) remains a pop culture touchstone, as do lines from *Aliens* (“This time it’s war...”), *Jaws: The Revenge* (“This time it’s personal...”) and *Poltergeist* (the infamous and chilling, “They’re Here...”).

“In the basement of a top medical school, Dr. Jessup floats in total darkness. The most terrifying experiment in the history of science is out of control ... and the subject is himself!”—*Altered States* (1980)

“Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, you can’t get to it.”—*Blood Beach* (1980)

“The five people believed to have drowned here never even made it past the sand!”—*Blood Beach* (1980)

“Pray you never meet them.”—*The Children* (1980)

“It’s not just a ship, it’s a killing machine.”—*Death Ship* (1980)

“Murder made to order.”—*Dressed to Kill* (1980)

“People used to laugh at Eric Binford.... Now with every performance, he knocks them dead.”—*Fade to Black* (1980).

“On the night before her wedding, every girl is alone.”—*He Knows You’re Alone* (1980)

“The Bradleys won’t be leaving home. Ever.”—*Home Sweet Home* (1980)

“I warned you not to go out tonight.”—*Maniac* (1980)

“A lesson in terror.”—*Night School* (1980)

“A nightmare so perfect, it could only have been made by man.”—*Saturn 3* (1980)

“Some Thing is watching, waiting and wanting on Saturn 3.”—*Saturn 3* (1980)

“It is not a fairy tale.”—*The Watcher in the Woods* (1980)

“It will take your breath away. All of it.”—*Dead and Buried* (1981)

“When the party was over ... the killing began!”—*The Dorm That Dripped Blood* (1981)

“Meet Andrew.... The road to Hell is paved with his victims!”—*Fear No Evil* (1981)

“The day you count on for terror is not over.”—*Friday the 13th Part II.*

“Pay to get in. Pray to get out.”—*The Funhouse* (1981)

“The time has come to tell the tale.”—*Ghost Story* (1981)

“Imagine your worst fear a reality.”—*The Howling* (1981)

“The Human Exterminator. He has his own way of killing.”—*The Prowler* (1981)

“It’s the land of hospitality ... unless you don’t belong there.”—*Southern Comfort* (1981)

“There is no defense.”—*Wolfen* (1981)

“The tenant in room 7 is very small, very twisted, and very mad.”—*Basket Case* (1982)

“The filmmakers strongly suggest that those who may be shocked by this unique, horrifying movie use caution when seeing this film.”—*The Beast Within* (1982)

“After 100 years, they have awakened.”—*The Boogens* (1982)

“The most fun you’ll ever have being scared.”—*Creepshow* (1982)

“Remember that little kid you used to pick on? Well, he’s a big boy now.”—*Evilspeak* (1982)

“It’s loose ... it’s angry ... and it’s getting hungry!”—*Humongous* (1982)

“There is no escape...”—*Madman* (1982)

“They’re Here.”—*Poltergeist* (1982)

“It Knows What Scares You.”—*Poltergeist* (1982)

“Your dreams will never be the same.”—*The Sender* (1982)

“Man is the warmest place to hide.”—*The Thing* (1982)

“You didn’t listen to mama the first time ... now he’s back.”—*Boogeyman II* (1983)

“Now there is a new name for terror.”—*Cujo* (1983)

“Based on a true story ... that isn’t over yet.”—*The Entity* (1983)

“The ultimate experience in grueling terror.”—*The Evil Dead* (1983)

“The third dimension is terror.”—*Jaws 3-D* (1983)

“If it doesn’t scare you to death, it will find another way.”—*Of Unknown Origin* (1983)

“You don’t have to go to Texas for a chainsaw massacre.”—*Pieces* (1983)

“Some extra-terrestrials aren’t friendly.”—*X-tro* (1983)

“You can’t believe everything you see.”—*Body Double* (1984)

“Will she have the power to survive?”—*Firestarter* (1984)

“The Madness inside us all.”—*Impulse* (1984)

“[T]he night new blood is pledged.”—*The Initiation* (1984)

“You’ve made it through Halloween, now try and survive Christmas.”—*Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984)

“The darkest day of horror the world has ever known.”—*Day of the Dead* (1985)

“If you love being scared, this could be the night of your life.”—*Fright Night* (1985)

“They’ll Get You in the End.”—*Ghoulies* (1985)

“She cooks. She cleans. She kills.”—*The Housekeeper* (1985)

“They’re back from the grave and ready to party.”—*The Return of the Living Dead* (1985)

“Between the wall and Hell ... Crawlspace.”—*Crawlspace* (1986)

“Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid.”—*The Fly* (1986)

“The terror starts the moment he stops.”—*The Hitcher* (1986)

“Horror has found a new home.”—*House* (1986)

“Maximum terror.”—*Maximum Overdrive* (1986)

“Night falls. So do their victims.”—*Neon Maniacs* (1986)

“The good news is your dates are here. The bad news is they’re dead.”—*Night of the Creeps* (1986)

“They’re Back!”—*Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986)

“The Most Shocking of Them All!”—*Psycho 3* (1986)

“Just when you thought it was safe to go on vacation.”—*Terror at Tenkiller* (1986)

“A biting comedy.”—*Vamp* (1986)

“It isn’t a game anymore.”—*Witchboard* (1986)

“Don’t play it alone.”—*Witchboard* (1986)

“He’s not from around here.”—*The Wraith* (1986)

“Harry Angel is searching for the truth. Pray he doesn’t find it.”—*Angel Heart* (1987)

“There are some prayers which should never be answered.”—*The Believers* (1987)

“Just when you thought it was safe to go back to the bathroom. *Ghoulies 2*—they’ll get you in the end ... again!”—*Ghoulies 2* (1987)

“This time, it’s personal.”—*Jaws: The Revenge* (1987)

“Sleep all day. Party all night. It’s fun to be a vampire.”—*The Lost Boys* (1987)

“Freddy’s just around the corner.”—*A Nightmare on Elm Street III: The*

Dream Warriors (1987)

“Where they’re headed is no mystery. What’s taking them there is.”—*Nightflyers* (1987)

“Before man walked the earth.... It slept for centuries. It is evil. It is real. It is awakening.”—*Prince of Darkness* (1987)

“Just when you thought it was safe to be dead.”—*Return of the Living Dead Part II* (1987)

“It looks like things in New York City are going down the toilet.”—*Street Trash* (1987)

“When Cynthia wakes up, she’ll wish she were dead....”—*Bad Dreams* (1988)

“It’ll eat you out of house and home.”—*Cellar Dweller* (1988)

“Ten years ago, he changed the face of Halloween. Tonight, he’s back.”—*Halloween IV: The Return of Michael Myers* (1988)

“They will tear your soul apart ... again.”—*Hellbound: Hellraiser 2* (1988)

“Do you know what terror is? Real terror? How long has it been since you’ve been on Elm Street?”—*A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master* (1988)

“Don’t bury me ... I’m not dead.”—*The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988)

“There are things on God’s Earth that we can’t explain and we can’t describe.”—*The Unnamable* (1988)

“A voyage into fear.”—*Dead Calm* (1989)

“Don’t Be Afraid. Be Very, Very Afraid.”—*The Fly II* (1989)

“Is it fact, fiction or nightmare?”—*I, Madman* (1989)

“Freddy delivers!”—*A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child* (1989)

“The phone sex line was for fantasy. Now it’s murder!”—*Out of the Dark* (1989)

“There’s a new name for terror.”—*Parents* (1989)

“Sometimes dead is better.”—*Pet Sematary* (1989)

“It’s all about fitting in.”—*Society* (1989)

Appendix D: They Starred in Eighties Horror Flicks

Many scream queens and boogeymen of yesterday became the major stars of today and tomorrow. A great number of performers that make up the Hollywood elite in the 21st century (including Tom Hanks, Johnny Depp, Meg Ryan and Drew Barrymore) got their starts in the good old slice-and-dice days of 1980s horror cinema. Here's a sampling:

Drew Barrymore in *Altered States* (1980)

Mickey Rourke in *Fade to Black* (1980)

Peter Horton in *Fade to Black* (1980)

Kevin Bacon in *Friday the 13th* (1980)

Tom Hanks in *He Knows You're Alone* (1980)

Rachel Ward in *Night School* (1980) and *The Final Terror* (1983)

David Caruso in *Without Warning* (1980)

Sharon Stone in *Deadly Blessing* (1981)

Daphne Zuniga in *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* (1981) and *The Initiation* (1984)

Dana Delany in *The Fan* (1981)

Sam Neill in *The Final Conflict: The Omen III* (1981)

Ken Olin in *Ghost Story* (1981)

Vanna White in *Graduation Day* (1981)

Edward James Olmos in *Wolfen* (1981)

Jason Alexander in *The Burning* (1982)

Holly Hunter in *The Burning* (1982)

Fisher Stevens in *The Burning* (1982)

Demi Moore in *Parasite* (1982)

Meg Ryan in *Amityville 3-D* (1983)

Daryl Hannah in *The Final Terror* (1983)

Joe Pantaliano in *The Final Terror* (1983)

Willem Dafoe in *The Hunger* (1983)

Bill Paxton in *Mortuary* (1983)

Shannon Tweed in *Of Unknown Origin* (1983)

Crispin Glover in *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* (1984)

Johnny Depp in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)

Cary Elwes in *The Bride* (1985)

Charles S. Dutton in *Cat's Eye* (1985)

Billy Zane in *Critters* (1986)

Kristy Swanson in *Deadly Friend* (1986)

Joan Allen in *Manhunter* (1986)

Doug Savant in *Trick or Treat* (1986)

Sherilyn Fenn in *The Wraith* (1986)

Bill Maher in *House 2: The Second Story* (1987)

Kiefer Sutherland in *The Lost Boys* (1987)

Paul Walker in *Monster in the Closet* (1987)

Patricia Arquette in *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987)

Laurence Fishburne in *A Nightmare on Elm Street III: Dream Warriors* (1987)

Viggo Mortenson in *Prison* (1987)

Julia-Louis Dreyfus in *Troll* (1987)

Hugh Grant in *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988)

Lara Flynn Boyle in *Poltergeist III* (1988)

Brad Pitt in *Cutting Class* (1989)

Molly Shannon in *Phantom of the Opera* (1989)

Appendix E: Then and Now— Recommended Viewing

Like the nightmare it is, the 1980s represent a neverending story. Walkmans have become I-Pods, and Atari 2600 has become an X-Box, but otherwise the similarities between the 1980s and the 2000s are frightening. A conservative is serving his second term in the White House (and his name is Bush), the Democrats put up a Massachusetts candidate in '04 (just like '88!), *Star Wars* is back in theaters, and Madonna is still releasing albums.

In our cineplexes, we also continue to be haunted by movies that reflect 1980s horrors. Aliens, Predator, Jason, Freddy, Michael Myers, Chucky and Pinhead are still doing their thing. Below is a list of recommended viewing that reveals how the 1980s cinema has lived on into the 1990s and the 2000s.

First Screen: Then View:

Alligator (1980) *Lake Placid* (1999), *Crocodile* (2000)

The Awakening (1980) *The Mummy* (1999)

The Boogeyman (1980) *Boogeyman* (2005)

The Fog (1980) *The Fog* (2005)

Friday the 13th (1980) *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003)

He Knows You're Alone (1980) *Scream 2* (1997)

Nightmare City (1980) *Land of the Dead* (2005)

An American Werewolf in London (1981) *An American Werewolf in Paris* (1997)

Anthropophagus (1981) *Ravenous* (1999)

The Fan (1981) *The Fan* (1996)

My Bloody Valentine (1981) *Valentine* (2001)

Scanners (1981) *X-Men* (2000), *X-2* (2003)

Strange Behavior (1981) *Disturbing Behavior* (1998)

Evilspeak (1982) *FearDotCom* (2002)

Madman (1982) *Cry Wolf* (2005)

Road Games (1982) *Breakdown* (1997)

The Hunger (1983) *Interview with a Vampire* (1994)

Sleepaway Camp (1983) *The Crying Game* (1994)

Sole Survivor (1983) *Final Destination* (2000)

Ten to Midnight (1983) *American Psycho* (2000)

Videodrome (1983) *The Ring* (2002)

The Hills Have Eyes Part 2 (1984) *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006)

A Nightmare on Elm Street(1984) *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), *Freddy Vs. Jason* (2003)

The Terminator (1984) *The Terminator 2* (1991), *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003)

Bloody Wednesday (1985) *Falling Down* (1993)

Day of the Dead (1985) *Land of the Dead* (2005)

Warning Sign (1985) *Outbreak* (1995), *Resident Evil* (2002), *28 Days Later* (2002)

The Hitcher (1986) *Joy Ride* (2001)

King Kong Lives (1986) *King Kong* (2005)

Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2 (1986) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003)

Fatal Attraction (1987) *Unfaithful* (2002)

Predator (1987) *AVP* (2004)

Child's Play (1988) *Bride of Chucky* (1998), *Seed of Chucky* (2004)

The Church (1989) *AVP* (2004)

Edge of Sanity (1989) *Mary Reilly* (1996)

Lisa (1989) *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997)

Appendix F: A Brief Conversation with Director Ken Russell

by Kevin Flanagan

Author's note: In summer of 2005, I learned that my friend and research assistant, William & Mary student Kevin Flanagan, would be attending a convention in Asheville, North Carolina, along with one of the most important and singular voices in 1980s horror cinema, Ken Russell. Kevin already knew Mr. Russell from his previous assignment on another film study book, so I tasked him to try for a little info on Mr. Russell's eighties horrors. Below is Kevin's piece, transcribed by Kevin in Q & A format.—John K. Muir

I had the opportunity to talk with Ken Russell on October 30, 2005 (Halloween Eve) at the Fine Arts Theatre in downtown Asheville, North Carolina. We first spoke about current projects, including his “The Girl with the Golden Breasts” for the anthology *Trapped Ashes*, which was slated to start filming soon in Vancouver. We also discussed his unrealized efforts, including an adaptation of Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that fell through the cracks in 1973, a version of Sacher-Mosch’s *Venus in Furs*, and a horror film called *Ketchup*. Conversation later turned to his output in the 1980s. My questions are in *italics*.

A lot of your films from before 1980 had horrific elements. Why was it that it was not until Altered States that you did a horror film?

Is that a horror film?

Some call it sci-fi, others call it horror.

The reason I did that film, apart from the fact that I liked the script, was that Arthur Penn had been working on it for a year but didn’t get on with Paddy Chavefsky, so they started looking for other directors. I didn’t know until later that I was the 27th or so director they tried. I was the only one who ever said “Yes.” I didn’t know Paddy Chavefsky’s reputation. I didn’t get on well with Paddy, only because he insisted on not getting on well with me. But, he did insist on one thing, for which I was thoroughly grateful. Because of all of the

scientific dialogue, he wanted [the actors] to speak as if they knew what they were talking about—of course they didn't, it doesn't make any sense to people who aren't scientists. So, we rehearsed it for three weeks, getting faster and faster at it.

They sound natural.

They did indeed.

On Altered States, did you help out with the effects, or did you particularly like working with special effects? There are some great images in the film.

A lot of them were “physically” done. I worked with Richard McDonald on the concepts, and we experimented a lot on the physicality of certain moments.

A lot of those aren't in the book. It isn't as descriptive on the visions.

[Chaveksky's] hallucinations were a shaft of blackness across the black universe, at 8 billion miles a second. How do you show black on black?

Not easily.

I took the sensibilities of a religious nut, the really powerful stuff from the Bible, and brought that to the screen. Seven-eyed rams and all that.

It translates well to film. Did you like the Gothic script as you got it, or did you have to re-write much?

I didn't re-write it at all. There aren't many scripts I've had given to me where I've loved them wholly, right away. Barry Sandler's [*Crimes of Passion*] is one, *Gothic* is another, *Savage Messiah* [1972] from Christopher Logue...

Appendix G: The Fifteen Best Horror Films of the 1980s

I viewed more than 325 films to complete this survey. There were great films, good films, bad ones and rotten ones in that mix. Selecting only a handful as representing the very finest is no easy task. Glancing back across the text, readers will see that several films were awarded the highest rating of four stars. Yet, even among this honored group some films stand out as being particularly outstanding, or particularly representative of the 1980s.

My choice for the best film of the decade will surprise and likely horrify those critics who so adamantly disliked it when it was first released in the summer of *E.T.*, 1982. John Carpenter's *The Thing* remains the scariest, most creative, and most influential film of the age. Premiering early in the so-called "gay plague," pre-AIDS days, Carpenter's *magnum opus* obsesses to a deeply disturbing degree on disease, transformation, and the frailty of pliable human flesh.

Similarly, it captures another feeling that dominated the 1980s: that we can't quite trust or even really know the man sitting beside us on the subway or living next door in that McMansion. Any one of them could be a "thing." This film represents a textbook example of the "don't worry/be afraid" 1980s paradigm: the notion that what appears normal and healthy may actually be sick, twisted and malevolent.

The Thing's remarkable mechanical special effects also hold up well today and the set piece transformations have been mimicked (but never equaled) in ventures such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). The idea of a "blood test" proving one's humanity is not only a harbinger of AIDS testing, but a conceit that would return in science-fiction television, proving the only way to detect one of the Dominion's Founders on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–99). Even *The X-Files* has gone to a remote Arctic outpost and faced insidious extraterrestrials in episodes such as "Ice." Claustrophobic, tense, and scary on an almost molecular level, *The Thing* is tops in the 1980s.

Coming in at number two is David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, another film that could easily be interpreted as an AIDS metaphor. Here, lonely scientist Seth Brundle branches out to "experience flesh" and the

result is a disease that alters his DNA, transforming him into a decaying, dying thing so gruesome that it is actually nauseating. *The Fly* is romantic in a perverse fashion, highlighted by great performances, and colored by the director's obsessions: flesh and machinery co-mingling.

Ken Russell's *Altered States* is my third choice for best horror film of the decade, because it asks the big questions about the universe and mankind's role in it. It's a spiritual odyssey that travels from the interior of an isolation tank to the outer limits of creation itself and never pauses for a breath. Filled with passionately and brilliantly delivered overlapping dialogue and impressive performances, *Altered States* leaps from strength to strength, hallucination to hallucination, all while remaining grounded in the human condition.

James Cameron's sequel, *Aliens*—my number four selection—is perhaps the greatest action horror film ever produced. Period. On one level, it's a Vietnam War allegory with American soldiers facing supposed "primitives" on their terrain and realizing the hardware and guns they've brought to do the job are inadequate.

On another level, the film expresses worry about the growing dominance of corporations. Also boasting a winning subplot about the maternal instinct, an Oscar-nominated performance by Sigourney Weaver, and amazing action sequences set in an *Alien*-controlled sub-basement and "hive," this film, to quote critic Joel Siegel, is like experiencing a Bruce Springsteen concert from "inside the bass drum."

Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* rescued a horror genre exhausted by the seemingly endless repetition of the slasher paradigm, and sent it blazing off in the direction of rubber reality, a trend which dominated the latter half of the 1980s. Starring Heather Langenkamp as one of the great final girls and Robert Englund as the ultimate Craven "bad father," Freddy Krueger, the original *Elm Street* is bloody, engaging and, like all these films, downright scary.

Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* is a triumph of style over substance and it revealed how a brawny visual imagination coupled with excessive gore and violence could literally bludgeon the senses. It's a daring knock-out punch from a young outsider, and in its time was the most intense movie ever made, leaving one's knees quaking in anxiety.

Tobe Hooper's *POLTERGEIST* is next. A supreme entertainment with impressive special effects, the film reveals to the Freelings that despite their name, the American dream isn't "free." It's built on the backs (or

graves) of others and as long as they profit by such capitalism they'll pay the price. The film is as emotional as it is scary, and that clown under the bed is an unforgettable terror.

John McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* in its detached, low-budget and realistic way brings horror back home. It reveals how human evil can dwell in the most innocuous-seeming places, and its artistic approach to depicting murder, mayhem and serial killers plays more like a kitchen sink art drama than exploitation.

Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead* takes what by all rights should have been a lame copy of Romero's films and transforms it into the finest zombie escapade of the 1980s. It echoes the punk nihilism of the age, taps into the nationwide fear of nuclear apocalypse, and ends on a down note. It's also funny, and leads the way to future zombie pics: fast ghouls!

Tom Holland has two titles on the list, *Fright Night* and *Child's Play*, and both are entertaining, layered films that reveal affection for genre clichés at the same time they tweak and modernize them.

Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* is the most original vampire picture of the decade, reinventing the Dracula mythos as southwestern cool rather than European Gothic, and *Dressed to Kill* is one of the decade's finest evocations of the Hitchcock aesthetic.

Warts and all, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* is one primal bludgeon of a film, charting with a baseball bat the disintegration of a writer's mind and consequently the destruction of an American family living in a "cartoon culture."

Finally, at number fifteen is a sentimental favorite, Thom Eberhardt's *Night of the Comet*, a low-budget fantasy horror which may just be the most fun any horror fan had at the movies in the 1980s. Valley girls, zombies, Catherine Mary Stewart, motorcycles, Uzis, and Cyndi Lauper. What more could one ask for?

1. *The Thing* (dir.: John Carpenter)
2. *The Fly* (dir.: David Cronenberg)
3. *Altered States* (dir.: Ken Russell)
4. *Aliens* (dir.: James Cameron)

5. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (dir.: Wes Craven)
6. *The Evil Dead* (dir.: Sam Raimi)
7. *Poltergeist* (dir.: Tobe Hooper)
8. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (dir.: John McNaughton)
9. *Return of the Living Dead* (dir.: Dan O'Bannon)
10. *Fright Night* (dir.: Tom Holland)
11. *Child's Play* (dir.: Tom Holland)
12. *Near Dark* (dir.: Kathryn Bigelow)
13. *Dressed to Kill* (dir.: Brian de Palma)
14. *The Shining* (dir.: Stanley Kubrick)
15. *Night of the Comet* (dir.: Thom Eberhardt)

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